

The Best
One-Act Plays
of
1954-55

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of
1954-55

Selected by
HUGH MILLER

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Preface

I had hoped to make this collection, my second in the series, thoroughly varied; but it is one thing to find a lot of good plays of any kind, and quite another to gather a representative sheaf of comparable quality. Thus it comes that, of this volume's ten plays, eight are comedies.

Every one knows that notable one-act plays are scarce. Pundits are quick to explain why this is particularly the case to-day. The one-acter, they say, is no longer fashionable; times are gone when leading players appeared in curtain-raisers, and the great tragedians would top off the evening with a screaming farce by a prominent author. They also tell us that Synge and Lady Gregory were, of course, part of the Irish literary revival, and eminent English authors of one-acters in the early years of the century were writing specifically for the new and vital Repertory theatres. And so on.

Whatever sort of history that makes, the fact of the matter is that there has always been a scarcity of notable one-act plays, for the single and simple reason that they are prodigiously difficult to write.

Now television widens a challenging horizon for dramatists. It is difficult to predict how they will meet the expected demand for short plays for fireside screens, but one thing seems certain: the art of good one-act playwriting will not become any easier.

In the present collection the marks of expert hands are clear to see in the comedies of Harold Brighouse, Joe Corrie, Philip Johnson, and R. F. Delderfield, while Hugh Ross Williamson's excursion into the background of the Court at Elsinore is as original as it is audacious.

Mr McArthur, a newcomer, gives us a melodrama in more than ordinarily vigorous Scots. Barbara Bingley also makes her first appearance in the series with an exotic and passionate little drama, and Janet Dunbar for her début makes spirited and stylish use of a Molière theme. Comedies by T. C. Thomas and David Campton—which were prizewinners at important Drama Festivals—provide varied sets of attractive acting parts.

H. M.

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Disclosure Day

Financially a Farce

By Harold Brighthouse

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CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

JESSICA

ELEANOR

PHILIP

LUCY

MARK EMBURY

LOLA

WILFRED

SCENE: *Sitting-room in Mark's house, before luncheon on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday.*

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

Disclosure Day

The scene is a sitting-room in a comfortable villa. Fire-place, with fire, centre. Window right. Door left. It is a man's room. MARK EMBURY is long a widower: his family has scattered: retired from business, he continues to live, alone, in his old house. The furniture is good but, if not shabby, shows signs of wear. The time is before lunch on the occasion of MARK's sixty-fifth birthday. On small table above door are sherry and four glasses.

MARK's daughters on arrival have shed outdoor clothes. Their dresses imply prosperity.

JESSICA, MARK's elder daughter, who is thirty, is alone on rise of curtain. She stands looking out of window. She has brought flowers, in florists' covering, which are on the settee. The door is open. ELEANOR, the elderly housekeeper, the old retainer, enters carrying a vase.

JESSICA. There's a car now. Philip's ridiculous two-seater.

[*She turns.*

ELEANOR. Will this do? Sorry to have kept you waiting. I had to wash it.

JESSICA. Thanks, Eleanor. [*During the ensuing, JESSICA arranges flowers.*] Tell me, how is my father?

ELEANOR. Just the same.

JESSICA. Good. No change at all?

ELEANOR. Not in body.

JESSICA. There is something?

ELEANOR. Something or nothing, you might say. We don't take much notice of it. We call it the master's hobby.

JESSICA. What is it?

ELEANOR. He's taken to examining the household bills.

JESSICA [*pausing at the flowers*]. That is new. I hope he doesn't—I mean, no suggestion that he doesn't trust you?

ELEANOR. Oh, no. I couldn't have that. Only . . . well, take to-

day's lunch for the family. His birthday lunch. It won't be as I'd planned it. I'd like you to know that it's not my fault.

JESSICA. You won't starve us, Eleanor. It is a little curious but don't let it worry you.

ELEANOR. We don't, you know. Old gentlemen have their ways.

JESSICA. And you're your sensible self about them.

[Gives ELEANOR the flower debris.]

ELEANOR. I try to be, Miss Jessica—Mrs Langley, I mean.

[PHILIP enters; he is twenty-five; likeable, if aggressive.]

PHILIP. And if that isn't it exactly! Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite fidelity. So, to our incomparable Eleanor, you're still Miss Jessica.

ELEANOR. I wish you were young enough to be smacked, Mr Philip.

PHILIP. I'm young enough to do this, Eleanor. [Kisses her. She's blushing. I swear to high heaven, she's blushing.]

ELEANOR. Oh!

[She is speechless for a moment, then exits, closing door.]

JESSICA. Why will you do such things?

PHILIP. Why? Self-interest. It pays to be popular with servants. By the way, hello, Jessica, and how are you?

JESSICA. I'm all right. You're sleek.

[Looks round, finds place for flower-vase.]

PHILIP. Sleek? I'm well-tailored. I'm well-barbered. And why shouldn't I be? Are you dressed in some mass-produced something bought at the sales?

JESSICA. Those days are over.

PHILIP. Yes. Ten thousand pounds rescued you from the sales. Another ten thousand delivered me from Fleet Street, and beyond expression are the thanks we owe to the father who begat us and endowed us.

JESSICA [flowers now finished with; sits]. I sometimes wonder about that, Philip.

PHILIP. About what?

JESSICA. Fleet Street.

PHILIP. Oh, my dear, a Bedlam. A rough-house. The toughest denizens wouldn't call it anything else. And I'm not tough. Oh, it has its uses: even for me it had uses. One sees life, and I wanted that. I wanted raw material for the novels I'm going to write. But

what a price I paid! The drudgery, the tedious monotony of being a news-editor's minion! Then out of the blue came rescue, that priceless, blessed opportunity to sit down and write.

JESSICA. I expect it's the sitting down that does it.

PHILIP. Does what?

JESSICA. My dear boy, you're putting on flesh like——

PHILIP. I deny it. I don't sit down. If you're under the impression that novel-writing is a sedentary occupation let me tell you that nine-tenths of it is wearing the carpet out, walking up and down the room looking for the right word. It's nine-tenths the hell of groping for the right word and one-tenth the heaven of finding it. [*Straightens, pats stomach.*] I am not putting on flesh, and I resent your calling me sleek when all I've done is not to appear at Father's birthday do looking like a tramp.

JESSICA. What's the score, Philip?

PHILIP. Score?

JESSICA. Yes. How many novels has our professional novelist published? Or have I missed something?

PHILIP. I sent you two.

JESSICA. And nothing since the second? What are you doing? Hatching a masterpiece?

PHILIP. I'm taking my time. Masterpiece? I don't know. That'll be for others to say. But I owe a debt to Father. He ridded me of the damnable distractions of hard labour on a two million circulation and, by God, I mean to pay. Look, Jessica, you've heard a lot of nonsense about the decline of the novel. Even the death of the novel. I'll show them if the novel's dead. I'll drag them from their television sets. [*Stands over her menacingly.*] And that, my beloved sister, is a conspicuous example of the English vice of understatement.

[*Enter LUCY, twenty-eight. JESSICA is the gentle sister.*

LUCY has underlying hardness. It did not occur to LUCY to bring flowers.

LUCY. Am I interrupting murder?

JESSICA. Only Philip letting off steam.

[*PHILIP meets LUCY, brushes her cheek with a perfunctory kiss, and crosses to window. LUCY stoops to kiss*

JESSICA.

LUCY. Hullo, my dear. [*Sits.*] Well, how's everything? Husband, children? All that?

PHILIP. Children! I forgot to ask. Sorry, Jessica. I'm the world's worst uncle.

JESSICA. You were being eloquent about yourself.

PHILIP [*turning from window*]. My favourite subject. Yes, but we are met together to-day, gathered from our widely separated parts of this island on a family occasion. And so, naturally, to children. Let's see. [*Points at JESSICA.*] Two? [*To LUCY*] Three? Or is it [*Pointing*] three and two?

LUCY. You know perfectly well.

PHILIP. A total five. Set against my two novels, I call that socially creditable. And is all quiet on the nursery front?

JESSICA. Nursery? With Cosmo leaving prep school next year and going to Winchester!

PHILIP. Winchester? Stepping out a bit, aren't you?

JESSICA. A lot you know about parents' duty.

PHILIP. By hearsay. By noticing how school fees rise. By realizing that all the same you pulled strings to get Cosmo into Winchester, which contrasts with my own intensely minor school, excites my envy of my nephew, and marks how this family advances. We're all sitting pretty on our cushions.

LUCY. A cushion wears thin when three infants sit on it, Philip.

PHILIP. The bachelor brother takes note of your remark, himself pointing out that both you blokes have income-earning husbands. Furthermore, my girl, you committed twins.

LUCY. Could I get a word in? Jessica, did you get the usual invitation to this birthday do?

JESSICA. Yes.

LUCY. Nothing unusual?

JESSICA. Well, a postscript, in red ink. 'Don't fail to come.'

PHILIP. How I hate red ink! How it reminds me of my old bank statements!

LUCY [*ignoring PHILIP*]. That's it; Humphrey thinks it may be significant. You see, it's five years since Father made us those gifts.

JESSICA. Would there be an inference?

LUCY. There might be another dividend.

PHILIP. I never thought of that.

LUCY. Humphrey did.

PHILIP. It's much more likely that the Old Man just wants to know how we're going on. Wants a report on our stewardship.

LUCY. It isn't stewardship. It's ownership. Mine hasn't gone on mink, but if it had, Father has no right to ask questions. And there's something else Humphrey and I thought of—Wilfred.

PHILIP. Wilfred! Oh, don't raise that ghost.

JESSICA. Yes, I think ghost is right after all these years. It's strange, isn't it? So unlike the rest of us. A man with a wanderlust. He might be anywhere—or nowhere.

PHILIP. The world is wide. Frivolities like passports wouldn't cramp Wilfred.

LUCY. He could send a post-card.

PHILIP. For example, from prison? Or do prisons allow postcards? I've really no experience.

JESSICA. Oh! Philip!

PHILIP. Well, where do people disappear to, nowadays? Moscow?

[JESSICA and LUCY make hostile gestures.]

Sorry. Don't shoot. But, really, why drag in Brother Wilfred when it's obvious that if Father has something special to say . . . don't you see it?

LUCY. I don't.

PHILIP. Darlings, our new mamma.

LUCY. Oh! Oh, dear!

[Enter MARK. He is a well-preserved sixty-five; grey-haired; a retired business-man who ought to be well contented. And this, surely, is a happy day? He exhibits signs of nervousness.]

PHILIP [with due exuberance]. My blessed father. My more than amiable parent. Felicitations on this day, sir.

[Shakes MARK's hand persistently.]

MARK [releasing himself]. You're very gushing.

[Crosses to JESSICA.]

JESSICA. Devoted greetings, Father.

LUCY. And may your every wish come true.

[Salutations being over, PHILIP crosses to tray.]

MARK. Very pleasant of you all. We'll postpone that, Philip.

PHILIP [sherry in hand]. Postpone the usual ceremony?

MARK. Sit down. I've something to say first. Rather a lot to say and I wish I hadn't. [Stands in front of fire, to address his seated audience; takes paper from waistcoat pocket, glances at it, throws it in fire.] No, too much like an agenda. [Clears throat.] However, first

... first I remind you that with to-day five years have passed since I made you certain gifts.

PHILIP. That was the special point of my felicitations, sir.

MARK. Allow me to go over old ground, Philip. I have my reasons. Very well, five years ago you knew my motive. I had strong feelings about State confiscation. I desired that the proportion of my estate which I then passed to my family should have its chance when I died of escaping the scourge of death duties. I took a customary step. Others in some recent examples and on a larger scale than mine took a similar step in vain. They died too soon. I have survived, and in so far I have succeeded in my object.

PHILIP. So may I repeat—

MARK. You may not. I'm doing the repetition.

LUCY [*thinking of her husband's hope*]. Repetition!

MARK [*eyeing her*]. The recapitulation of my motives. And now ... now to something that is not repetition. I must tell you that last week I got Dr Stevenson to examine me.

JESSICA [*rising*]. Oh! Father!

MARK. That could be spelt f-a-r-t-h-e-r. Stevenson surprised me. So much so that I went up to London and saw two consultants, both, I understand, of high professional eminence, though one seems more sanguine than the other. Two doctors out of three give me fifteen years' expectation of life, the third assesses me at twenty years. I've the blood pressure of a boy.

JESSICA [*going to him, hand on his shoulder*]. But that's marvellous.

MARK. It's often done, you know. Eighty. Possibly eighty-five. Nothing positively marvellous in these days of prolonged life when what to do with our veterans is a national problem which you may find personal.

[JESSICA returns to chair.] But there it is. I am medically certified a fit man. And that on the notes I threw into the fire was listed as Disclosure Number One.

PHILIP. A very happy disclosure, sir.

MARK. Possibly. Lucy, when I used the word 'repetition' you—

LUCY. I know. I didn't mean ... it was only something Humphrey said.

MARK. Did he? He's a business-man. He thought the incidents of five years ago might be repeated? And if he'd known of my doctor's opinions, his thought would have been even more plausible.

LUCY. You mean that Humphrey is . . . right? [*She rises.*]

MARK. He couldn't be wronger. Disclosure Number Two is that I am broke. And you see how inconvenient it is that I am likely to live for another fifteen years.

LUCY [*slumping into chair*]. Broke!

PHILIP. It isn't possible. Don't you see, he's pulling our legs. It's a birthday joke. If I may say so, sir, you were always a bit of a comedian.

MARK. Was I? Perhaps that excuses my behaviour of the last five years. Perhaps you'll find it comic.

JESSICA. You are seriously——

MARK. I am seriously a bankrupt. Actually if not yet officially. My future is in your hands.

PHILIP. Good heavens!

MARK. No doubt I've shocked you.

PHILIP. That puts it mildly. Something that simply couldn't happen, and you say it has happened.

MARK. Yes. You might like to talk it over. [*He goes to door.*] I'll leave you. You may have to consider a fall in your standards of living, which I raised five years ago.

LUCY. Oh, no. That's not good enough.

[*Intercepting him at door.*]

MARK. I beg your pardon?

LUCY. Surely we're entitled to an explanation?

MARK. You require me to expose the entrails of my conscience?

LUCY. Conscience!

PHILIP. The entrails of same. You still make it difficult for us to take you seriously.

MARK. We'll see. Tell me, do you people ever think of Wilfred?

JESSICA. We spoke of him to-day.

MARK. The family rebel. Unruly, disorderly, never settling to anything after the War. Then disappearing. And yet I often wonder if Wilfred isn't more a proper child of mine than any of you.

JESSICA. Thank you, I'm sure.

MARK. Forty years of steady application to the small business my father left me. Building it up. Watching myself, stifling my impulses to take risks. Being careful, punctual, regular at office, scrupingly, penny-wise careful. Then at sixty selling out for a price that enabled me to provide for my children and to leave me with something.

At last I could let go. At last I no longer had to throttle down a passion. At last I could be a gambler.

PHILIP. Gambler! Good Lord, it's a revolution!

MARK. Did the wise child know his own father, Philip?

PHILIP. I certainly wasn't wise to this. And you lost!

MARK. I lost. Were you about to add that I deserved to lose?

PHILIP. That would be hitting a man when he's down.

MARK. I'm down, and I'm bewildered. I feel victimized. But how? By whom? Is it reasonable that my judgment, which saw me through forty years of business progress, should go completely haywire when I turn to the Stock Exchange? For what am I being punished? For depriving the Treasury of some future death-duties? Perfectly legal. Is there a Higher Power deciding that it's wrong to benefit by lawful evasion, chastizing me and causing me to drop money like a drunken sailor?

LUCY. Oh, my dear father, what a fantastic idea!

MARK. It's a fantastic loss, Lucy.

LUCY. But why drag conscience into it? If I lost a packet on the Derby I dare say I'd howl, but it wouldn't be about conscience.

MARK. Well, let's forget that twinge. Let's pass to my major case of conscience.

JESSICA. Oh, no! There can't be more.

MARK. Decidedly there's more.

PHILIP. Disclosures. A serial, by Mark Embury. Do you mind if I have a drink? *[He goes towards tray.]*

JESSICA. No, Philip, no! *[Preventing him]* Those are for . . . it's the birthday tradition.

PHILIP *[sourly]*. It doesn't seem necessary to drink his health. Three doctors can't be wrong.

JESSICA *[touching his arm]*. Let's keep this pleasant.

PHILIP. Sorry. You win. Well, facing it without Dutch courage, what's the awful rest?

MARK. I mentioned Wilfred.

PHILIP. Don't tell me he's turned up.

MARK. No. In fact, he may be dead.

JESSICA. Oh, dear!

MARK. I regard the evidence as inconclusive. We should know more later to-day. Meantime you'd better all read this letter.

[Gives letter, in envelope, to PHILIP.]

PHILIP [*reading envelope*]. Mexico City. Abogado—I suppose that means lawyers.

MARK. The letter's in English.

PHILIP [*now with letter*]. With American spelling.

JESSICA [*impatiently*]. What is it, Father?

MARK. It's a woman in Mexico claiming to be Wilfred's widow.

LUCY. Widow! [*LUCY and JESSICA together read the letter.*]

PHILIP. The letter's dated two months ago.

MARK. Yes. I got Vickery to write to these people. The presumption has to be that they are reputable lawyers. Mexico City isn't barbaric. Vickery asked for proof, official copies of Wilfred's death certificate——

JESSICA. Oh! Horrid!

MARK. —and of the marriage certificate.

PHILIP. They've come?

MARK. No. The . . . lady's come. She wrote me from London. I've invited her here. To-day.

LUCY. That's a nice addition to the birthday party.

JESSICA. If she followed up that letter in person it seems serious.

PHILIP. It is and it isn't. As to Wilfred—yes, of course. But this woman's on a fool's errand. What she's after is the widow's portion, and you've just made it extremely clear that there is no portion.

MARK. But there is.

PHILIP. How can there be?

MARK. Because I was fair to my family. Because when I made gifts to you I made a similar gift to Wilfred. He wasn't here for signatures, so it's in my name. And now do you see the battle with conscience that I've been fighting? Watching my own resources slip away when I'd ten thousand pounds I could legally touch and morally couldn't?

JESSICA. But, Father, if Wilfred has died——

MARK. Leaving a widow? Always supposing her claim is above-board, what was Wilfred's is hers.

LUCY. Who's going to tell her? She can't know. Wilfred didn't tell her. He didn't know.

MARK. I know; and that, my dear, is where my conscience had its Armageddon.

LUCY. I hope you won.

[*MARK is silent.*]

Surely we come first! Surely we mean more to you than a woman in Mexico you never heard of till a couple of months ago! You can't do this to us, Father. You've lost a lot of money. All right, it was yours to lose, but at the back of behind you had this nest-egg, and you simply can't give it away and expect us to . . . I don't know what you do expect of us.

MARK. I'm awaiting your suggestions. The nest-egg is not mine.

LUCY. Well, I think you're being sanctimonious. Ten thousand pounds is too much to be saintly about. [Enter ELEANOR.

ELEANOR. Excuse me, sir.

MARK. Is it?

ELEANOR. Yes, sir. In the breakfast-room.

MARK. Thank you. [To the others] I thought I would see her first alone. [Draws himself up, and marches out.

JESSICA. What's she like, Eleanor?

ELEANOR. She startled me, Miss Jessica.

[Exit ELEANOR before they can ask more.

JESSICA. Startled her? Oh, no! Not a Negress!

PHILIP. Might be dark brown. Well, where are we? She's come.

LUCY [at window]. In a Rolls-Royce.

PHILIP [looking]. Worse and worse.

LUCY. Why?

PHILIP. How do you look for a Mexican woman to come begging? On foot, don't you? And barefoot at that. She comes in a Rolls, and the better the car the bigger the expectation. She's not going to be fobbed off with a pittance.

JESSICA. If she really is——

PHILIP. Can we doubt it? Would any woman travel three or four thousand miles if she weren't pluperfectly certain of her status? No, my dears, we're up against it. She gets Wilfred's money and we've got the old man on our hands. Where's Winchester now, Jessica?

JESSICA [firmly]. Cosmo is going to Winchester. Whatever happens, that stands.

LUCY. I do agree. We can't, we absolutely can't abandon all our plans for our children.

PHILIP. Mothers will be mothers. But, you know, we can.

LUCY. Can what?

PHILIP. Abandon plans. It so happens that none of us has emulated Father. We haven't gambled it away. We can . . . return it. That is the prospect before us.

LUCY. The benevolent bachelor.

PHILIP [*savagely*]. Yes, I feel benevolent. Back to Fleet Street for me, back to asking Mrs Simpkins what she said when her husband fell forty feet from a scaffolding and didn't break his neck. And that novel . . . God knows. I can't mix that with Simpkins. Oh, what's the good? You dream of creating greatness and you wake up back in the reporter's room.

[*Enter MARK, showing in LOLA—night-club type, in clothes which, justly, startled ELEANOR. MARK has in hand documents.*]

MARK [*vaguely introducing*]. Philip, Jessica, Lucy.

LOLA. Pleased to meet you.

[*This phrase causes JESSICA and LUCY to exchange glances.*]

MARK. Won't you sit down? [PHILIP indicates chair. LOLA sits.]

MARK. I have formally accepted Lola as the widow of my elder son.

PHILIP [*behind LOLA's chair*]. Well, well!

LOLA [*looking up at PHILIP*]. Yeah, we got the show-down over. I brought credentials. [MARK passes papers to PHILIP.]

LUCY. But you're not Mexican.

LOLA. Who said I was? I am Lola. I am international.

PHILIP [*with certificate*]. This gives Brooklyn as your birthplace.

LOLA. What's wrong with Brooklyn?

PHILIP. I haven't been there. Oh, wait a minute. Lola? Lola the dancer. You've just made quite a hit somewhere.

LOLA. Not too bad, considering the handicap. You've awful prim notions about costume in your night-spots.

PHILIP. Really? What's your usual? *Reductio ad absentiam*?

LOLA. That's how this came about. I was dancing back in Mex. City, which is where Wilf and me lived, and I just naturally met up with Herman Juaroz, on account of he's an old friend. Well, I had this booking in London, and I figured I ought to get acquainted with Wilf's family. Only Wilf was cagey about his past and—

MARK. Cagey?

PHILIP. Secretive.

MARK. He'd nothing to be secretive about. . . .

LOLA. That's according. All I knew was like on those certificates, born in England. And Herman said England's a big place. It isn't really, not when you've danced cities from Buenos Aires to Montreal, but I might never have found you if Herman hadn't started to think, and remembered Wilf once mentioning the name of his home town. So Herman called up some place where they keep English telephone directories, and then he wrote to you. And you don't have a common name like Smith or Johnson, so his letter reached.

JESSICA [*dourly*]. We seem to be greatly indebted to Mr Herman Juarez.

LOLA. He's a good guy. He gets results.

MARK. What was Wilfred . . . what was he doing in Mexico?

LOLA. He got by.

MARK. I mean, his occupation.

LOLA. This and that. The big break was gun-running.

MARK. Gun-running?

LOLA. There's always some politician down in Central America wanting to be the next President. That means guns. It's how Wilf got the dough to——

[*She breaks off.*]

MARK. Yes?

LOLA. Never mind. It went. Money's no adhesive tape.

MARK. Er . . . no.

LOLA. Like when Wilf and me fetched up in Phoenix, Arizona, with about a hundred dollars, and Wilf in his condition.

PHILIP [*looking at certificate*]. He died in Phoenix, I see.

LOLA. It's a place consumptives go to.

JESSICA. Was Wilfred——

LOLA. Yeah. Parked out at a ranch near Phoenix. Must be the saddest gay place on earth, Phoenix. Full of wives and husbands of the people on the ranches waiting to see if the Arizona air will cure or kill. They'd go crazy if they didn't relax. I danced in Phoenix. Helping them to relax.

PHILIP. Professionally, you mean.

LOLA. I got paid. I wasn't good then, but, gosh, how I trained, till I dropped, and then went on at Pantage's and did four shows a day. I was dancing for two. Lungers can't work, not when they're as far gone as Wilf was. And, believe me, those ranches cost. Air isn't free in Arizona.

MARK. You were supporting Wilfred?

LOLA. I'll say I supported him. There wasn't any competition for the job. *[To emphasize which, she rises.]*

MARK. This is the most touching story of a wife's devotion that I ever heard. *[He puts his hands on LOLA's shoulders.]*

I'm moved profoundly. Poor Wilfred! Poor, brave you! My one satisfaction is that my thanks to you will not be empty. You are, in fact, an heiress.

[LOLA's triumphant grin is eclipsed, as ELEANOR opens door.]

ELEANOR *[gasping]*. It's—it's——

Enter WILFRED, thirty-five, in good if unobtrusively American clothes. LOLA hides behind PHILIP.

[ELEANOR goes, closing door.]

MARK. Wilfred!

WILFRED. I couldn't resist it, sir. Your sixty-fifth. So I hopped a plane, and——

MARK *[emotionally]*. Wilfred! *[A long hand-shake.]*

PHILIP. Evidently the god in the machine. *[Moves, exposing LOLA.]*
Have you met your widow?

WILFRED. Lola! How do you come into this?

LUCY. I knew that tale was a lie. I'd have sworn it.

WILFRED. What tale?

PHILIP. The clown with the breaking heart. Bravely she danced to keep you both, while you died slowly.

LOLA. It wasn't a phoney tale. It's a true tale. I borrowed it.

PHILIP. Do you care to see your death certificate? *[Offers it.]*

WILFRED. A fellow likes to know where he died. Yes, no doubt a competent bit of forgery. The best of everything was never too good for Lola.

MARK. Forgery! Forgery's a criminal offence.

WILFRED. Oh, nothing to it. You can buy forged passports anywhere. This would be child's play. *[Pockets certificate.]* Lola's been around.

MARK. My dear Wilfred! *[Sits, as if needing support.]*

WILFRED. You haven't knocked about the world, sir. I'm a bit bothered to see how she traced you . . . oh, but of course! In those days I did marry under my old name.

JESSICA. Then she's your wife?

WILFRED. Not for a long time. Lola was a first experiment. What's she doing here? Gold-digging?

LUCY. She very nearly dug a fortune out of Father.

WILFRED. And I spoilt it? Now, isn't that too bad? [*Advances on LOLA.*] You tramp, you God-damned little tramp! Did I divorce you, and did you get complete and final settlement after that gun-running deal of mine? Did I? And did you?

LOLA [*standing up to him*]. So what? And you're not dead. But how was I to know it?

WILFRED. That's true. [*Slight hesitation*] I hope. I didn't change my face when I changed my name.

LOLA. And where was I to see your face?

WILFRED. So long as you didn't this little trick wasn't a bad effort. You always had a brain for privateering enterprise. But this isn't one of your successes. The family circle does not include you.

PHILIP [*opening door*]. It includes you out. May I see you to your car?

LOLA. This is what I get after the trouble I took, and——

WILFRED. It's doing you a favour. [*Shows her the certificate.*] They're particular in England about scraps of paper.

[*PHILIP bows her out, and follows her.*]

LUCY. The little so-and-so.

WILFRED. She was always a trier. It's a rough world when it isn't smooth.

MARK. But Wilfred! Posing as your widow and making claim to your estate.

[*Rises.*]

WILFRED. Fooled herself there, didn't she? As if I ever had any money in England. But she might have chiselled something out of you.

MARK. She'd have had your money, Wilfred.

WILFRED. Mine? Who's left me any?

MARK. I have. Some years ago I made a family distribution. Naturally, I included you.

WILFRED. That was nice of you. [*Hand on MARK's shoulder.*] Mighty nice. You did it, and you didn't leave out the family blot. I appreciate that.

MARK. You have ten thousand pounds, with five years' interest.

WILFRED. Ten thousand pounds. That's quite a piece of money by English standards.

JESSICA. For heaven's sake, Wilfred, what are your standards?

WILFRED. They vary. But I'll tell you. I won two oil-wells off a man from Houston, and they can play poker in Houston. My standard's pretty high.

MARK. Your standard at poker. Man, do you live by card-playing?

WILFRED. Oh, come, be fair. Be fair to yourself. Can you see a son of yours being an habitual gambler? [MARK turns quickly.] No. It's worse. A long way worse. I'm in the movies.

JESSICA. Films? You mean you act?

WILFRED. Opinions differ about that.

LUCY. I'm sure I've never seen you. And I do go to films.

WILFRED. There's a kind of film you wouldn't go to if you were paid. My kind. I've drifted down, Lucy, I that was once a stevedore in Callão, drifted to the lowest depths of the treacle barrel. A man once wrote that my films are the screen's equivalent to an expurgated edition of Felicia Hemans.

MARK [*vaguely*]. Felicia . . .?

JESSICA. Think of your nursery days.

MARK. That's a long time ago, Jessica.

JESSICA [*reciting*]. I hear thee speak of the better land,
Thou callest its children a happy band;
Mother, O! where is that radiant shore;
Shall we not seek it, and weep no more?

WILFRED. Now do you get it? Flicks for the hicks, certified stain-less for the simple darlings of the Baptist Belt. With salary to compensate for shame. For six days a week I lose my self-respect. On the seventh day I find it again. Pay-day.

LUCY. What's your name in the queasies?

JESSICA. Oh, let him keep his shameful secret.

WILFRED. I'm going to. In fact, I took a little trouble about it. I got an English cheque signed by the studio accountant. [Turns to MARK.] You see, sir, I wanted to bring you a birthday present, and, honest to God, I hadn't the time to go looking for something good enough. So I fined myself so much for every birthday I've missed, and——[Puts envelope in MARK's jacket pocket.] Well, a man can't send flowers to a man, can he? Oh, and that gift you mentioned. I think the world of it. I think it was grand of you to set that aside for the bad boy of the family. It was fine, and it isn't chicken-feed either,

not even in Hollywood, and put down into dollars. But forget it, will you? Just forget it.

[MARK in a cliché of an attitude has hand on mantelpiece and looks into fire. PHILIP enters, twirling a glass.]

PHILIP. We'll need another glass. [LUCY to tray, filling glasses.]

WILFRED. Speaking as one who knows, that was a miracle of timing. [PHILIP crosses to tray. As he crosses . . .]

And I hope, my young brother, that you've not been making a date with Lola. She's a dangerous woman.

PHILIP. Yes: consequently of vital interest to a novelist.

JESSICA [bringing drink to WILFRED, c.]. You said she was your first experiment. . . .

WILFRED. So she was. I didn't have beginner's luck.

JESSICA. And since then, Wilfred? Have I a very long row of ex-sisters-in-law?

WILFRED. Give me time, Jessica. Give me time.

PHILIP. Ready? [They form semicircle round MARK.]

ALL. To Father. [They toast him.]

MARK. Thank you. [Raises his glass.] This time, Wilfred. To his prodigal return. [They toast WILFRED.]

CURTAIN

King Claudius

By Hugh Ross Williamson

To
Gordon

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CHARACTERS

HAMLET, *King of Denmark*
HAMLET, *Prince of Denmark, his son*
CLAUDIUS, *the King's brother*
GERTRUDE, *wife to the King*
POLONIUS, *the Lord Chamberlain*
OSRIC, *a courtier*

SCENE: *The Armoury in the Royal Palace at Elsinore.*

TIME: *About two months before the first act of William Shakespeare's play "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark."*

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Margery Vosper, Ltd, 32 Shaftesbury Avenue, London, W.1

King Claudius

As the curtain rises, the KING and the PRINCE are duelling. The KING makes a beating attack and disarms the PRINCE. As the PRINCE recovers his rapier the KING remarks pompously:

KING. To beat or not to beat, Hamlet—that is the question.

PRINCE. It's surely a matter of the strength of your wrist, Father. Yours is much stronger than mine. Let me try it again.

KING. Certainly, my boy, certainly.

They engage again. The KING makes another beating attack, but this time the PRINCE parries successfully and gets under his guard.

PRINCE. What about that one?

OSRIC has tiptoed in to watch the bout, and cannot restrain himself from exclaiming:

OSRIC. A hit! A very palpable hit!

KING. What are you doing here, Osric?

OSRIC. Your Majesty will pardon me. I heard sounds of combat and—[*he is very embarrassed*] . . . and . . . Your Majesty knows my little weakness.

KING. Which one, Osric?

OSRIC. The *duello*, sir.

PRINCE. Osric is a magnet to steel, Father. A combat is the breath of life to him. . . .

OSRIC [*still wretched*]. But I assure you, Your Majesty, I did not know it was so august a practice. . . . I will withdraw *instantly*.

KING. You may stay if you wish and do not distract us. It may be you will be able to profit from what you see.

OSRIC. A thousand thanks, Your Majesty.

[OSRIC retires to a corner of the stage, following the practice in a kind of ecstasy, and describing the play in a voice the audience can hear. Each time the PRINCE defeats his father, and each time OSRIC becomes more and more dejected.]

OSRIC. One-Two-Three, Double and Disengage, Treble, Cut-Over and One-Two, Cut-Over and Double, One-Two and Deceive the Counter . . . oh!

Croisez and hit in Quarte—in Quarte . . . oh!

. . . Riposte in Septime! . . . oh!

[*He starts to steal away, more in sorrow than in anger, when the two fencers stop their practice.*]

KING. Ah, Osric, you have seen enough?

OSRIC. Yes, Your Majesty.

PRINCE. And your verdict?

OSRIC. Unbelievable! *Incroyable!* Quite unbelievable!

[*He bows with a flourish and hurries out, lifting his eyes to heaven.*]

PRINCE. You see, Father, the eye has its uses no less than the wrist.

KING. Your eyesight is certainly keener than mine, but there is no need for alarm.

PRINCE. We may hope not.

KING. According to our Ambassadors, the King of Sweden has very poor eyesight.

PRINCE. Let us hope that they are more accurate in that than is usual in their dispatches.

KING. Our spies say the same thing. Yes. He's almost as blind as a bat. In fact, I am at a loss to understand why he has accepted my challenge at all—except, of course, as a matter of honour.

PRINCE. What better reason? Was it not honour that made you fight Fortinbras of Norway?

KING. Of course. I am Hamlet the *Dane*. We have a tradition of honour in the family. Even your uncle Claudius has it in a measure. But the Swedes and Norwegians are really foreigners.

PRINCE. To me, Father, it is a source of perpetual wonder why the lesser nations do not emulate our example. Last term at Wittenberg I held a disputation on the subject with the Germans.

KING. The upshot, I trust, was satisfactory?

PRINCE. It lasted three days, but we could arrive at no conclusion.

KING. That is the worst of words. The sword, my son, the sword. That is the kingly way. Disputations are for women. You cannot dispute about honour. You can only defend it. There's a

saying attributed to one of our Wise Men in the days of the Old Gods. [*He declaims.*] 'Rightly to be great——

PRINCE [*taking it up*]. 'Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake.'

That's one of the earliest things I can remember. And young Yorick's always quoting it.

KING. I did not think he was so serious-minded.

PRINCE. His tone, unfortunately, is not altogether serious.

KING. A fellow of infinite jest, Hamlet, like his father. Now let us have one more bout. Your mother is expecting me, and you know how she dislikes being kept waiting.

[*They begin to fence but are interrupted by the entrance of*
CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE and POLONIUS, *who goes to the*
KING.

KING. Why, Polonius, what's the matter?

POLONIUS. You will pardon, my liege, this rude interruption of so necessary an exercise——

KING. *Necessary*, Polonius?

POLONIUS. By so blunt a turn of speech I had no intent to belittle Your Majesty's swordsmanship, but to announce, with what delicacy I might, news the urgency of which is such that——

CLAUDIUS [*interrupting*]. The King of Sweden's dead.

KING. The King of Sweden dead?

CLAUDIUS. Yes.

KING. That is a heavy blow, Claudius.

CLAUDIUS. Much heavier than you realize, my dear brother.

KING. How so? Certainly I cannot fight him now . . . but then, Polonius, you should have said that my practice was unnecessary.

POLONIUS. I wish it were so, Your Majesty. In very truth I wish it. But, alas, it is not so. The old king left an heir. Not indeed a son, but a son-in-law. Though this is an affinity not of nature but of contract, there are cases where a legal son—if I may so tease the meaning of son-in-law—yields nothing in affection to a son in nature. [*He glances at PRINCE HAMLET, who is talking to GERTRUDE.*]
Or so it seems to be in Sweden. Thus it arrives that——

CLAUDIUS [*interrupting*]. The new king wants to fight you.

GERTRUDE [*advancing*]. Hamlet, my love, you cannot do it.

KING. Why not, Gertrude?

POLONIUS. Your Majesty, you will be killed.

PRINCE. We must all die some time.

POLONIUS [*not masking his dislike of the PRINCE*]. That, Your Highness, is easier to say with equanimity when one is young than when one is old.

CLAUDIUS. And, in any case, my dear nephew, it is not the point.

KING. My challenge was to the King of Sweden. Who holds the title is of no account. In honour I must stand by my word if the new King of Sweden wishes to reply to the challenge. What point can there be but that?

POLONIUS. To come briefly to it, my liege, the new King of Sweden is the best swordsman in the three realms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

KING. Then there is the more honour in vanquishing him.

GERTRUDE. But, my love, suppose that he vanquishes you?

KING. As our son has so finely said, we must all die some time.

POLONIUS. Your Majesty will not doubt my tried affection for you, or so far misconstrue me, as to believe that your death would not be for me the uttermost calamity. But here lies, bound up with your sacred person, an affair of State.

CLAUDIUS. If you're defeated and killed what will become of Denmark?

PRINCE. Will it matter?

KING. I shall leave behind a worthy son—and you, Claudius.

GERTRUDE [*bursting into tears*]. Don't speak of it!

KING. Comfort your mother, Hamlet.

[*The PRINCE leads his mother into a corner and comforts her.*]

CLAUDIUS. My dear Hamlet, as my elder brother you have always seemed to me immortal. But this duel is not a personal matter. It is, as Polonius says, an affair of State. Denmark needs you——

KING. All my duels have been affairs of State. By a duel I laid the foundation of the Danish empire. As Fortinbras fell——

CLAUDIUS. Slipped.

[*POLONIUS coughs hurriedly.*]

KING. What did you say, Claudius?

CLAUDIUS. I said Fortinbras slipped.

KING. How *dare* you?

CLAUDIUS. Aren't you forgetting, my dear Hamlet, that I was your second, and, as your son might put it, the looker-on most surely sees the game? Fortinbras *slipped*.

POLONIUS. Your Majesty! Your Grace! Is it at this moment a matter of moment—if you will forgive the phrase—how the death of Fortinbras was accomplished? We know—and when I say ‘know’ I mean that we have the evidence of our eyes—that the old King of Norway died with the sword of our great King Hamlet in his heart?

CLAUDIUS. And now our great King Hamlet is going to die with the sword of the young King of Sweden in his heart.

[From her corner, GERTRUDE overhears, and starts crying again. The PRINCE pacifies her in dumb show, and POLONIUS remarks to the world at large:]

POLONIUS. What tender creatures women are!

KING. If I die, I die in honour for Denmark.

CLAUDIUS. If you die at this particular moment there soon won’t be a Denmark. Hamlet, give up this plan.

KING. My honour demands that I should fight.

POLONIUS. My liege, no. The new King of Sweden has sent his couriers——

KING. Couriers from Sweden? Here, in Elsinore?

POLONIUS. Yes, Your Majesty, they are waiting——

KING. Then why was I not informed?

POLONIUS. That, Your Majesty, is what I came—with a haste which, if inexpedient, was prompted solely by loyalty and an appreciation of a situation as urgent as it might be dangerous—to tell you.

KING. We will see them immediately.

[POLONIUS goes out, after bowing.]

KING. Gertrude! Hamlet!

GERTRUDE. Yes, my love!

PRINCE. Yes, Father!

KING. You will accompany us to give audience to the Swedish envoys.

GERTRUDE. Yes, my love!

PRINCE. Yes, Father!

KING. And you, Claudius.

CLAUDIUS. I beg to be excused.

KING. Why?

CLAUDIUS. You know I have a certain impetuosity of temper. It might so fall out that I should be so moved as to introduce into the discussion a note of disharmony.

KING [*with kindly condescension*]. I know, my dear Claudius. I understand. I've watched your nature. Perhaps it's as well that I am the elder. You would never have made a King.

[*The KING sweeps out with GERTRUDE on his arm, and followed by the PRINCE. CLAUDIUS bows. Left alone, he handles the KING'S rapier, makes some passes in the air, then shakes his head and throws the rapier down. He sits and yawns. Almost immediately OSRIC enters.*

OSRIC. So you're *here*! I've been looking for you absolutely everywhere. I'd no idea the palace was so large. There must be more backstairs in Elsinore than anywhere in Christendom.

CLAUDIUS. Though no one, my dear Osric, really knows how to use them. . . . And now you have found me?

OSRIC [*charming and sincere*]. Elsinore seems less intolerable.

CLAUDIUS. My compliment to you is to believe the sincerity of yours to me. . . . What have you been doing?

OSRIC. For a moment I was watching the King and the Prince duelling. I've never seen anything like it Could the King *ever* fight properly? His wrist, his feet, his eye . . . Even a simple Double Coupé . . .

CLAUDIUS. I know. I'd prefer not to talk about it. My brother's swordsmanship is a rather sore point at the moment; though, if the situation were not so serious, it might relieve the tedium.

OSRIC. If only we could go back to Italy!

CLAUDIUS. Italy!

OSRIC. Can't you find an excuse? You remember what you said when we were in Venice?

CLAUDIUS. In Venice one could think as if Denmark did not exist, and order one's life without reference to Elsinore.

OSRIC. It was a promise.

CLAUDIUS. Promises made in extreme felicity are no more binding than those made under torture. Indeed, extreme felicity is a species of torture.

OSRIC. Why did we ever come back?

CLAUDIUS. Because my brother ordered it.

OSRIC [*recognizing finality in his tone*]. Your sense of duty, Your Grace, is the only Northern thing about you—except, possibly, your appreciation of wine.

CLAUDIUS. The sunlight of Bordeaux! But even the drinking is

different. In the South, one drinks to heighten pleasure; in the North, to induce forgetfulness.

OSRIC. Then let us drink.

CLAUDIUS. I can think of no good reason for refraining.

OSRIC. Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you. As I was turning out one of my boxes to-day I found that miniature we thought we had lost.

CLAUDIUS. *You thought you had lost.* The one from Naples?

OSRIC. Yes. That exquisite green. Do you remember?

CLAUDIUS. Indeed I do. The only time I have come near to hating you was when you told me you could not find it. Was there anything else you had mislaid?

OSRIC. Nothing important. You can see them if you want to. A silver belt; some necklaces—I think we got those in Rome. And that phial of poison the mountebank sold us near the Rialto.

CLAUDIUS. That was a waste of money.

OSRIC. But he was such a charming young man!

CLAUDIUS. Part of the night. Unreal, like the scent of the South . . . Here in Elsinore it's difficult to believe they still exist.

OSRIC [*shocked at the sentimentalism*]. Your Grace! Please! Let us go and drink immediately.

CLAUDIUS. Yes, Osric, drink! It's dangerous to dream in Denmark.

[They start to go out, but at the door they are met by

GERTRUDE. *After bowing, OSRIC continues on his way out, but his face is eloquent.*

GERTRUDE. He's still giving audience to the Swedes.

CLAUDIUS. So I imagined. Why have you come back?

GERTRUDE [*with an arch titter*]. What an ungallant question!

[She puts her hand on his arm. He moves away.]

CLAUDIUS. You know the Court is all eyes.

GERTRUDE. I said I felt faint.

CLAUDIUS. Do you suppose that anyone believed that?

GERTRUDE. Well, I did feel faint. A little. [*Cooing*] Claudius!

CLAUDIUS. You take impossible risks—especially when your son is at home.

GERTRUDE. He's quite happy with his father, learning how to be a king.

CLAUDIUS. There are times, Gertrude, when it would be to the advantage of everybody if you remembered that you are a queen.

GERTRUDE. And forget that I am a woman?

CLAUDIUS. There is very little danger of anybody forgetting that, my dear—sister.

GERTRUDE. Sister? [CLAUDIUS *nods*.] Why not—lover? [CLAUDIUS *shakes his head*.] You—you don't doubt me?

CLAUDIUS [*seeing that an outburst is imminent*]. No, no. I meant only that we are not lovers yet.

GERTRUDE [*on the verge of tears*]. You mean—you mean you don't love me?

CLAUDIUS. Of course I love you.

GERTRUDE. Then why do you say such cruel things to wound me?

CLAUDIUS. Gertrude, you are always pretending to misunderstand me. When I said we are not lovers I meant that my brother has as yet no reason to reproach me for anything I may have done. That is all.

GERTRUDE [*sadly*]. Yes, you are almost as honourable as he is.

CLAUDIUS. In, I trust, a somewhat less irritating fashion.

GERTRUDE. You're not as pompous about it, if that's what you mean. But it's quite as exasperating. . . . [*Almost as an afterthought*] You know, Hamlet didn't want to marry me, either.

CLAUDIUS. *Either?*

GERTRUDE. You don't really, do you?

CLAUDIUS. There's no question of marriage.

GERTRUDE. But suppose that in this duel Hamlet should—er—slip?

CLAUDIUS. Then the situation would be altered.

GERTRUDE. You mean . . .

CLAUDIUS. Of course. When I was away in the South the only thing that made return to Denmark seem tolerable was the thought that you would be here.

GERTRUDE. You wrote such beautiful letters about it. 'A point of passion in a waste of ice'—that, you remember, is what you called me. But since you have returned the ice seems to have cooled your ardour.

CLAUDIUS. Not at all. It's a matter of practicality. Supposing my brother should discover—

GERTRUDE. Then it's not a matter of your honour forbidding—

CLAUDIUS. Honour and practicality are cousins. That is what men realize and women forget. When *you* want something you take it,

if it's practical to do so, without any scruple. But *we* have to be satisfied that we can interpret it as being honourable also.

GERTRUDE. That must be what Hamlet means when he says that men have superior minds.

CLAUDIUS. Which Hamlet?

GERTRUDE. My son.

CLAUDIUS. So I supposed. But it's a question rather for his disputatiousness than for my simplicity. All I know is that it is neither honourable nor practical for us to—er—to——

[He finishes the sentence with an aimless gesture.]

GERTRUDE. Things are bound to mend, but meanwhile . . .

[She puts her arms round his neck and kisses him. POLONIUS enters and coughs. They notice him.]

CLAUDIUS. Well, Polonius?

POLONIUS. The King has sent me to inquire whether the Queen has recovered from her faintness. He further requests that if she has she will return to the audience-chamber.

GERTRUDE. He's so careful about my health. It's very gratifying, if at times inconvenient. How long will the audience last, Polonius?

POLONIUS. Some hours, madam. They are discussing the etiquette of the duel.

CLAUDIUS. He's decided to fight?

POLONIUS. Yes, Your Grace.

GERTRUDE. How noble, and yet how dangerous! Is my hair all right? And my earrings? I hate these earrings, but Hamlet likes them. A most curious side to his nature. Do you like earrings, Polonius?

POLONIUS. If I may crave your indulgence for an honest answer, I think, madam, they are a barbaric ornament.

GERTRUDE. You are quite right. Do you like earrings, Claudius?

POLONIUS *[before CLAUDIUS can answer]*. If I might presume to advise your Majesty——

GERTRUDE. Yes?

POLONIUS. The King seemed a thought impatient.

GERTRUDE. I will go at once. It must be some time since you left him. You inquired first at my apartments, of course. I know you are the soul of discretion. *[Her arch little laugh again.]*

POLONIUS. I trust I showed that discretion which it has always

been my care to give to all matters connected with the Throne, Madam. I did *not* go to your apartments. I came straight here.

[He bows fussily as she goes out.]

[Crossing urgently to CLAUDIUS] Time is precious now, Your Grace, and so I sought you. . . .

[He automatically picks out of CLAUDIUS's beard one of GERTRUDE's earrings.]

CLAUDIUS *[taking earring]*. Oh! . . . It were better if the Queen took greater care of the earrings that she dotes on so.

POLONIUS. My Lord, we are lost!

CLAUDIUS. This is unfortunate, but no one has noticed it save yourself. . . . And you were ever discreet, Polonius.

POLONIUS. I was not referring to that. That is nothing . . . nothing, that is to say in comparison with our main problem. The King has determined to fight the duel. He has told the Ambassadors so. It is settled.

CLAUDIUS. The duel is settled?

POLONIUS. I cannot believe that the King can now go back on his word and keep his honour. The Ambassadors are in triumph. Their smiles . . .

CLAUDIUS. This means the end of Denmark.

POLONIUS. I myself could have put it no more succinctly. It will be, literally, the end of Denmark.

CLAUDIUS. If my brother is killed in this duel the King of Sweden will be entitled to annex the country. Those *are* the conditions, aren't they?

POLONIUS. Certainly. The conditions are identical with those which governed the duel with Fortinbras of Norway, which laid the foundations of our great empire, when he so fortunately—slipped.

CLAUDIUS. Can you remember them?

POLONIUS. Certainly.

[He declaims.] 'Our valiant Hamlet . . .

Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact

Well ratified by law and heraldry

Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands

Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror,

Against the which a moiety competent

Was gaged by our King, which had returned

To the inheritance of Fortinbras
Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same cov'nant
And carriage of the article designed
His fell to Hamlet.'

CLAUDIUS. Surely, Polonius, as Lord Chamberlain you have only to censor official verses. You have no need to learn them.

POLONIUS. With your permission, sir, I will entrust you with a secret. *I composed that.*

CLAUDIUS. Certainly, now that you point it out, it has something of your turn of phrase. But the import is the matter. If he fights this duel, Denmark becomes a province of Sweden. Is there nothing we can do? I mean, if he strained his leg, or fell ill of a fever, or——

POLONIUS. Then he would insist on either you or the Prince taking his place; and, craving your pardon for a truth as lamentable as it is hard to speak, and not as a criticism as misplaced as it would be spiteful, the result would be the same.

CLAUDIUS. Certainly. *We are both worse swordsmen than my brother, bad as he is.*

POLONIUS. I am glad your Grace shares my estimate of the situation.

CLAUDIUS. It hardly helps.

POLONIUS. Of course, if such a calamity as his death—from which misery may God defend us——

CLAUDIUS [*looking him steadily in the eye*]. Amen to that!

POLONIUS. If such a dire misfortune as the death of so great a paragon of Danish royalty should befall——

CLAUDIUS. His successor would be under no obligation to fulfil the conditions of this duel?

POLONIUS. Our highest judicial authorities would almost certainly take that view.

CLAUDIUS. On the other hand, my nephew might prefer to carry out what he would consider his father's wishes. His filial instincts are quite remarkable.

POLONIUS. Remarkable indeed. It is seldom one finds a son so devoted. [*Suddenly*] Not, of course, that there is any necessity for him to succeed.

CLAUDIUS. But if he fails Denmark is lost.

POLONIUS. The word 'succeed' has a certain ambiguity. I was referring not to the duel, but to the throne.

CLAUDIUS. But surely——

POLONIUS. For the good of Denmark, it would be better to have as a ruler one who was skilled in the ways of the world and the habits of diplomacy, like—if I may instance it without being understood to mean more than my meaning—Your Grace, than a university student whose academic learning serves but to emphasize the immaturity of his mind.

CLAUDIUS. I think we understand each other very well, Polonius.

POLONIUS. I am sure we *should*, Your Grace.

[*POLONIUS with an obeisance approaches CLAUDIUS and puts out his hand for the earring which he is turning over in his hand.*]

The earring, Your Grace.

CLAUDIUS. Yes, of course. The ear is such an odd thing to wish to call attention to. After all, Nature gave us hair to cover and protect it, and . . .

POLONIUS [*matter-of-fact*]. Shall I return it, my lord?

CLAUDIUS. There's one obstacle still. . . .

POLONIUS. You can rely on my absolute discretion to replace it unobtrusively. . . .

CLAUDIUS. I was following my thoughts, Polonius. Only my thoughts. [*Suddenly, and with great intensity*] Polonius, do you know anything about women?

POLONIUS. I was married. It was expected of me. And I have a daughter.

CLAUDIUS. Must one do what is expected?

POLONIUS. When one occupies a public position it is wise. My wife understood the situation perfectly, and I flatter myself that so entire was our discretion that even the gossips of the Court had no idea of the extent of her hatred of me.

CLAUDIUS. There was some slight suspicion, I believe, my dear Polonius, when she threw herself from the battlements. I was in Italy at the time, so I cannot speak with certainty.

POLONIUS. Your Grace, I assure you that that unfortunate episode in no way reflected on me. There is a tendency to suicide in her family. I have to watch Ophelia very carefully.

CLAUDIUS. You found marriage bearable, even with a wife who hated you?

POLONIUS. It was my duty, as a high state official, to bear it. In

many ways it gave me a greater freedom than if she had loved me. Jealousy, for example, was entirely absent on both sides.

CLAUDIUS. Yes, Polonius, there's the rub. A doting woman——

OLONIUS. The Queen, Your Grace, is a most remarkable woman. I am thinking of your brother. You would not remember, sir, but we had the greatest difficulty in arranging that marriage; and yet, once it was consummated, nothing could have been happier. The Queen has that rare gift of making herself indispensable to the object of her affections. Appetite seems to grow by what it feeds on.

CLAUDIUS. I only hope, Polonius, that you are as wise as you seem.

OLONIUS. By comparison with women, Your Grace, politics is but an infant class. And, even if I should be mistaken, I trust that your high sense of duty and honour will lead you to pay the price—even the highest price—that may have to be paid for the sake of Denmark.

CLAUDIUS. Denmark! Denmark!

This royal throne of kings, this seat of Mars:

This fortress built by Nature for herself

Against infection and the hand of war——

OLONIUS. That, Your Grace, is a very admirable sentiment. Moreover, it is very nearly poetry.

CLAUDIUS. Thank you, Polonius. I wrote it one night in Italy—in Venice. It was an enchanted night, and Denmark seemed as distant as a star. Osric and I were near the Rialto when a mountebank—such a charming young man——[*His tone changes completely.*] Polonius, go and find Osric and ask him to bring me what we bought from the mountebank.

OLONIUS. But what did you buy from the mountebank?

CLAUDIUS. In some matters, Polonius, a king should keep his own counsel. Do as I say.

OLONIUS. Yes, Your Majesty. [*At door*] But would Your Majesty permit that I first return to the Council Chamber to ascertain what orders His Maj . . . er . . . your brother may have for me before he goes to the orchard?

CLAUDIUS. The orchard?

OLONIUS. Ay, to sleep, to sleep . . . his custom always of an afternoon.

[CLAUDIUS *nods*, and POLONIUS *goes out*.]

CLAUDIUS. The orchard!

[He sighs. Then softly, almost to himself murmurs as he looks at GERTRUDE'S earring in his hand, while he pulls at his own ear with the other.]

Denmark! Denmark! Not once or twice in our rough Danish story, the path of duty was the way to glory.

CURTAIN

Davy Jones's Dinner

By T. C. Thomas

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CHARACTERS
(*In order of appearance*)

FRED THE LAMPS

DAVY JONES THE 'BOX

LIZA HARGEST

POTTER

PROSSER THE POLICEMAN

PRYCE-POWELL, J.P.—*the Local Squire*

MORGAN THE KEEPER

This play won the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy in the British Drama League Festival in 1954; also the New Play Award at the Welwyn Drama Festival 1955, and the Original Play Award at the Letchworth Drama Festival 1954.

Applications regarding amateur performance of this play should be addressed to Messrs J. Garnet Miller, Ltd, 54 Victoria Street, London, S.W.1

Davy Jones's Dinner

SCENE: *The signal-box at Pentremawr, a lonely station on a slope of the Beacons between Newport and Brecon. Right, up-stage, is the door which opens to a platform at the top of a flight of iron steps. The row of levers are stage centre a few feet from the back wall with instrument boxes (a) on the left and (b) on the right.*

A low cupboard, up left, serves as a desk, and above it are a wall telephone and buzzer. A log-book for entering running-times of trains is open on the desk.

Down right is DAVY JONES's Locker, a strongly made box of considerable dimensions, conspicuously padlocked.

Down left is a small slow-combustion stove on which a whistling kettle has been set to boil. Before it is a 'screw' piano stool, incongruous but serviceable. DAVY JONES's tall stool is placed, centre, a few feet in front of the levers.

It is a bright autumn morning. FRED THE LAMPS, a boy of sixteen or thereabouts, is sitting on the locker polishing a double-barrelled shotgun. Inspired by the departing whistle of the 10.15 goods, he croons one of his 'home-made' verses, adapting the grammar to make the rhyme

FRED [*singing*]. The Great Western's Cock Canary

He do whistle as he go.

Jawch! His top-notes in Pontsticill

Wake the dead in Nantyglo.

[*Nailed boots are heard on the steps. FRED puts the gun on locker and moves quickly to levers, and begins to polish them with great energy.*]

DAVY JONES [*entering*]. Still at those levers, boy?

FRED. Nearly finished, Mr Jones.

DAVY. About time, too.

[*DAVY takes token from pouch and inserts it in instrument (b).*]

FRED. I've been giving your gun a rub-over, Mr Jones.

DAVY. I told you to leave it in the locker.

FRED. There's a patch of rust in the left barrel.

DAVY [*concerned*]. Is there?

FRED. Aye, as big as a thruppenny-bit. Look for yourself.

DAVY. Now in a minute, boy.

[*He presses knob on instrument (b). Single gong in reply*
Set the points and the distance-signal, boy, while I am entering the
goods. [*DAVY writes in log-book*

FRED. Very good, Mr Jones.

[*He resets levers 1, 3, 6*
It's the night mists, Mr Jones. Rust anything, they will. Shall
slide the window, Mr Jones?

DAVY. Yes, boy.

[*FRED slides open window section, left. DAVY moves across
to locker.*

DAVY. Now for a look at the gun. [*He picks up gun and, opening
breach, looks through the left barrel.*] Didn't you put some oil on the
pull-through?

FRED. A few drops, that's all.

DAVY. Must get rid of that rust. I will bring the wire brush next
shift. Remind me, boy.

FRED. Yes, Mr Jones.

[*DAVY closes breach*

DAVY. Here—put the gun back out of sight in the locker.

FRED [*taking gun*]. Hadn't we better leave it out, Mr Jones, just
in case?

DAVY. Of what?

FRED. He was up in the oak-tree again last night. I shone my
torch on him after the late passenger.

DAVY. Why didn't you use your four-ten?

FRED. No chance, Mr Jones. Morgan the Keeper was about.

DAVY. A pity, that is.

FRED. Aye.

[*FRED puts the gun on locker. DAVY sits on stool centre*
Mr Jones. The sun is peeping over the Top.

DAVY. What about it?

FRED. It will wake him up.

DAVY. I will never rest until he sleeps for ever.

FRED. That won't be long now.

DAVY. Go you down, boy, and turn the key in the booking-
office.

FRED. Very good, Mr Jones. *[He moves to door.*
Shall I keep my eyes open, Mr Jones?

DAVY. It *would* be a change from sleeping on your legs.
[FRED begins to descend steps.

Where did you put my pipe?

FRED *[off]*. On the desk—under the time-table.

[DAVY collects pipe, and is filling it when FRED creeps up the steps.

FRED *[loud whisper]*. He's on the move.

DAVY. Where?

FRED. Look! Half-way up the tree on that sticking-out branch.
[He reaches for gun.] Here's the gun, Mr Jones.

DAVY. Too far!

FRED. Put the cartridge in, Mr Jones. *[DAVY loads gun.*
Here he comes. *[A whirr of wings.*

Straight to your cabbage plants, Mr Jones.

DAVY *[muttering]*. His last meal before Kingdom Come.

FRED. Keep down, Mr Jones. He's got sharp eyes, has that old bird.

[DAVY crawls to open window, and is slowly elevating the barrels of the gun when a shrill voice calls from the bottom of the steps.

LIZA HARGEST *[off]*. Davy Jones! *[A whirr of wings.*
[DAVY remains on his knees near window.

DAVY. Blast!

FRED. There's a pity!

LIZA *[off]*. I'm coming up, Davy Jones.

[LIZA enters. She is an energetic, determined widow with an 'eye to business' in more than one way. She stands just inside doorway looking in astonishment at the kneeling figure.

What are you kneeling there for, Davy Jones? Saying your prayers?

[DAVY rises slowly to his feet, and, a menacing figure with the gun in his hands, turns in to LIZA.

There's dangerous you look.

DAVY *[grimly]*. I am dangerous, Liza Hargest.

LIZA. Put that gun away. It might go off without you meaning it.

DAVY. *With* me meaning it, more like.

LIZA. What is worrying you, Davy bach?

DAVY. Don't 'Davy bach' me. Come you over by the window.

[LIZA puts her basket on DAVY'S stool and crosses to the open window.]

LIZA. Well, Davy Jones?

DAVY [pointing out]. Look at that garden, Liza Hargest. Ten shillings a year it costs in rent to the Great Western. By the sweat of my brow I have ridded it of catch-grass, thistles, ratstail, and groundsel. [With a suspicion of humour] From the Wilderness it has blossomed into the Garden of Eden.

LIZA. Garden of Eden, indeed! [After leaning out for a more thorough examination] Still, it does you credit, Davy Jones. But there, you can pop out between the trains and do the weeding in the Company's time.

DAVY. Making me out dishonest, are you?

LIZA. Just a joke, Davy. There's touchy you are this morning.

DAVY. It's that blasted bird—getting on my nerves!

LIZA. What bird?

FRED. Cock pheasant.

DAVY. The one you scared away with your 'Davy Jones!'

LIZA. Explain yourself, man.

DAVY [pointing]. See that oak-tree by the side of the line? That's where he spends his nights ready to swoop down first thing for his breakfast from my bit of a garden. Stubble-wheat to the left, a field of rape to the right, the whole world before him, and he chooses my couple of square yards to peck out the hearts of the cabbage plants.

LIZA. My word, Davy, you *are* upset!

FRED. Three lots of Brussel sprouts at a shilling for twenty-five and four of Savoys at two-and-six a hundred. That's what he's spoiled, Mrs Hargest.

LIZA. Why on earth don't you shoot him?

DAVY. Wasn't I going to rid the world of the biggest locust that ever devoured its greenness when you had to open your face and scare him off?

LIZA. Indeed, there's sorry I am. But don't worry, Davy. There will be plenty of chances to get even with him.

DAVY. Not if you are about. [The kettle on the stove whistles.]

LIZA. A cup of tea, is it? Well, well! Fancy me arriving just when the kettle boils.

DAVY. Fancy!

LIZA. There's lucky.

DAVY [*bitterly sarcastic*]. Very.

LIZA. You would like me to wet the tea, perhaps?

[*DAVY is beyond speech. LIZA moves about the 'box, very much at home. It is obvious that she has been 'lucky' on many occasions. She goes to the cupboard and takes out a tea-pot with a broken spout, and a cocoa-tin that serves as a tea-caddy. She makes the tea.*

I came in plenty of time for the train in case you might be making a cup. Nothing to beat tea after a long walk. Sugar, Davy?

[*DAVY snorts.*

I don't see any milk.

FRED [*who has been enjoying himself*]. Shall I slip down to the Cwm for half a pint, Mr Jones?

DAVY [*angrily*]. You damn well slip down to that Lamp Room.

FRED [*very submissively*]. Yes, Mr Jones.

[*He crosses to door, turns, smiles, and exits quickly.*

DAVY [*crossing to locker and putting down gun*]. I will put the gun out of my hands, Liza Hargest, in case I might be tempted to use it.

LIZA [*cheerfully*]. That's better.

DAVY [*viciously polite*]. If I had known you were calling I would have put down red carpet on the steps.

LIZA [*unperturbed*]. Don't mention it, Davy.

[*Fumbling in her basket, she produces a medicine bottle half-filled with milk.*

I've brought my own milk.

DAVY [*almost defeated*]. There's lucky!

LIZA [*beaming*]. Very.

[*DAVY sits on the piano stool and eyes the tea LIZA hands him with grim distaste before venturing a sip. He splutters.*

LIZA. Not to your taste, Davy?

DAVY. Too strong!

LIZA. Well, top it from the kettle.

[*DAVY does so.*

I've been thinking about you a lot these last days, Davy.

DAVY. Have you now?

LIZA. A lonely life, yours is.

DAVY. I haven't noticed it.

LIZA. Four years a widower have left their mark on you, Davy, and there's easy it is to tell a lonely man.

DAVY. Is it now?

LIZA [*after a sigh*]. When I lost *my* man four years last Harvest Thanksgiving I found out what it was to be lonely. A bereaved woman puts all her wasted love into housework. From morning to night I dusted and polished until my house was a picture.

DAVY. Are you hinting there is something wrong with *my* house?

LIZA [*sadly*]. There is dust an inch thick on the harmonium.

DAVY. Have you been nosing round Ty Coch?

LIZA. Only one peep through the window, Davy. There was the harmonium with *Hymns Ancient and Modern* open at 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden'—and enough dust to *make* the garden.

DAVY. That's enough of your insults.

LIZA. Trying to help, I am. You know you can't look after yourself properly, Davy. You are as helpless as a baby about the house.

DAVY. Am I now? Let me inform you, then, Liza Hargest, that there are four rooms to my house—two up, two down, and I clean one every week. From top to bottom my house is made spotless every month.

LIZA. You must have forgotten to tear a leaf off the calendar.

DAVY. You leave my house alone.

[DAVY *pours a second cup for himself and takes a deep gulp of tea.*]

Might I ask the reason for your sudden interest in Ty Coch?

LIZA. Friendly sympathy, shall we say?

DAVY. At your age a woman wouldn't set her bonnet at a man?

LIZA. What made you think of that, Davy Jones?

DAVY. Perhaps I ought to tell you that I am a contented man, Mrs Hargest. It would be a pity, now, for you to think that there is a vacancy at Ty Coch.

LIZA. Why?

DAVY. Because there isn't.

LIZA. If you were the last man on earth, Davy Jones, and I the last woman, I wouldn't touch you with a shunting-pole.

DAVY. Very good. Now we know exactly where we are. So there is no need to get excited.

[*But LIZA is excited.*]

LIZA. Who do you think you are? I suppose there is too much dust

on the looking-glass at Ty Coch for you to see yourself. Pig's bristles on your chin and grease all over your sleeve-waistcoat—a fine lady-killer *you* are, Davy Jones.

DAVY [*overwhelmed*]. All right, Liza, all right! Sit down and drink your cup of tea.

LIZA. Not till you have apologized.

DAVY. For what?

LIZA. Insulting me.

DAVY. I ought to have known better. Sorry, Liza.

[*A slight pause—LIZA sipping her tea with dignity and in silence. From the Lamp Room FRED tries out another verse. . . .*]

FRED. With a rattlin' and a bumpin'
Train goes crawling up to Pant.
And the engine sobs his heart out
Like a jilted elephant.

[*A bicycle bell rings from the platform.*]

POTTER [*off*]. Davy Jones about?

FRED [*off*]. In the 'box, Mr Potter.

POTTER [*off*]. Got a parcel for him.

FRED [*off*]. Go on up!

[*POTTER comes up steps on the trot, enters, and stops just inside the door. A little old cock-sparrow of a man driven from London during the War by flying-bombs. Nothing would drive him back.*]

POTTER. 'Morning, Dave. Got a parcel for you. Hallo, who's this? Liza Hargest, is it? Oho! Sorry, Dave.

DAVY. What for?

POTTER. Rushing in without knocking. But don't worry. Old Potter knows his onions. Never played gooseberry in' his life.

DAVY [*rising*]. Get out of this 'box, Potter.

POTTER. Come off it, Davy.

LIZA. Out with him.

POTTER. Keep your hair on, Dave. Haven't I come out of my way to do you a good turn? No need to fly off the handle at a bit of a joke.

LIZA. Joke, indeed!

POTTER. I've brought your cabbage plants, Davy.

DAVY. Who said I wanted them?

POTTER. Dai the Blacksmith. Said it's a job to keep up the supply. He put a few broccoli in extra. Two bob, Dave!

DAVY. Take them back and tell him to stick to his anvil.

POTTER. Right you are, Dave. Give them here.

DAVY. No—perhaps I had better keep them.

POTTER. Make your mind up. Can't wait all day. Two bob. Thanks, Davy boy. Sorry I can't stay. Thanks for the warm welcome. Ha, ha! 'Morning, Liza! [*He notices gun on the locker.*] Say, what's the gun for, Dave?

DAVY. Get a move on or you'll find out.

POTTER. Thought you might be one of Pryce-Powell's shooting party. Ha, ha! Can I leave my bike in the Lamp Room? Old Potter's one of the beaters, Dave. Money for dirt! All you have to do is whack every bush with a stick and shout 'Cock up!' So-long, Dave. So-long, Liza. Shall I close the door? More private like. Ha, ha!

DAVY. Close your head, more like.

POTTER [*at top of steps*]. Say, Dave, old boy, got a licence for that gun?

DAVY. Of course. Why?

POTTER. That's all right then.

DAVY. What's all right?

POTTER. Prosser the Policeman is coming up the platform.

DAVY. Hell!

POTTER. So it's lucky you got a licence. Ha, ha!

[*He slams door and goes down the steps.*]

DAVY. Where the devil shall I hide it?

LIZA. Behind the locker.

DAVY. Let's hope he doesn't start nosing round.

FRED [*off. Loud enough to warn the dead*]. Good morning, Mr Prosser.

[*DAVY has moved quickly, and is back on the stool by stove as PROSSER clumps up the steps. He opens door and enters.*]

DAVY. Come you in, Prosser.

PROSSER. I am in, thank you.

[*DAVY and LIZA are sipping tea—a picture of innocence.*]

PROSSER looks what he is, a ponderous, pompous, slow-thinking country policeman.

DAVY [*indicating locker*]. Sit you down, Prosser.

[PROSSER *cautiously lowers his bulk on to the proffered seat*.

LIZA. A cup of tea, Mr Prosser?

PROSSER [*after a slight hesitation, for he has reason to suspect the show of friendliness*]. Don't mind if I do. [LIZA *swills her cup, throws the dregs through the open window and pours tea for PROSSER*.

Thank you, Liza Hargest.

LIZA. Plenty of sugar, Mr Prosser?

PROSSER. Very nice indeed.

DAVY. Catching the 10.45, is it?

PROSSER. Not exactly.

DAVY. Talk sense, man. You are either catching it or not catching it.

PROSSER. Shall we say that I am taking a morning stroll?

LIZA. Early to be about, isn't it?

PROSSER. *Early!*

LIZA. For you, I mean.

PROSSER [*darkly*]. Perhaps you ought to know, the pair of you, that I am about late as well as early.

LIZA. Indeed, thankful we are.

DAVY. Very thankful.

LIZA. Safe in our beds with men like Prosser about.

[*An ominous pause.*]

DAVY [*too politely*]. Might I ask, Mr Prosser, to what we owe the pleasure of your company?

PROSSER [*equally polite*]. Shall we say, Davy Jones, that it is a sudden concern for your health?

DAVY. Very kind of you, Prosser.

LIZA. Very kind, indeed.

PROSSER. Don't mention it. [*Slight pause.*] Oh—now I come to think of it, there *is* one other little matter.

DAVY. Is there now? I thought there might be.

PROSSER. Your gun, Davy Jones. I heard down in the village that it is for sale.

DAVY. Well, it isn't.

PROSSER. No?

DAVY. No!

PROSSER. You *do* own a gun then, Davy Jones?

DAVY [*trapped*]. What if I do?

PROSSER. Might I inquire where you keep it?

DAVY. At Ty Coch. Where else?

PROSSER. Where else, indeed? And, being a law-abiding citizen, you possess a licence for it, of course. Can I see it, Davy Jones?

DAVY. I haven't got one.

PROSSER. Oh!

DAVY. There's nothing wrong with that, Prosser, and well you know it. A licence is to *carry* a gun.

PROSSER. A lawyer you ought to have been, Davy Jones—not a signal-man.

DAVY. Are you going to charge me with anything or are you not?

PROSSER [*remembering past lessons*]. I am not, Davy Jones. [*He rises.*] Thank you for the nice cup of tea, Mrs Hargest.

LIZA. Welcome, indeed.

[PROSSER is on his way towards the door when the cock-pheasant decides to make another raid. A whirr of wings. PROSSER moves centre and looks out through the window. DAVY's face betrays his agony of mind.]

PROSSER. Well, I never did see! There's a cock-pheasant pecking at your cabbages, Davy Jones. [*DAVY moves to window.*] Quite tame, too. Must be hand-reared. Beautiful bird!

DAVY [*tortured*]. Beautiful!

LIZA [*standing*]. There's lovely.

PROSSER. Lucky you've got a tender heart, Davy Jones.

DAVY. What?

PROSSER. Like your cabbages. Notice you, Liza Hargest, how that bird shows his breeding. No coarse leaves for him—only the tender morsels. That comes of being reared by the gentry, I shouldn't wonder.

[DAVY chokes.]

Anything wrong, Davy Jones?

DAVY. This pipe—a bit strong on the swallow.

PROSSER. Very kind of you, I must say—very kind, not to grudge the bird a few cabbage plants. Aye, indeed, Mrs Hargest, he looks the picture of innocence.

LIZA. Davy Jones?

PROSSER. The pheasant.

[DAVY splutters.]

I should give that pipe a good clean if I were you. [*He claps his hands.*] Home you go! Shoo!

[A flutter of wings.]

[PROSSER crosses to door.]

PROSSER. Well, good morning, Mrs Hargest.

LIZA. Good morning.

PROSSER [*at door*]. Davy Jones.

DAVY. Ayer?

PROSSER. It might pay you to take out a gun licence. I'd think of it.

DAVY [*swallowing his bile*]. Very considerate of you, Prosser.

PROSSER. And a game licence.

DAVY. What?

PROSSER. In case you might be tempted. Quite a few pheasants are disappearing, Davy Jones, and they cost a pound apiece to rear by hand. No, no—I am not suggesting that you have anything to do with it, but Pryce-Powell is a magistrate, and he is making too many complaints for my liking.

DAVY. Serves him right. Didn't he loose a mangy dog-fox in the Plas Wood, right against the broody hens with the young pheasants?

PROSSER. Maybe. But watch your step.

DAVY. I'll watch it.

PROSSER. And one thing more for your information. There are twenty-three people with guns in Pentremawr.

DAVY. Very interesting.

PROSSER. And three with licences.

DAVY. Oh?

PROSSER. At Ty Coch your gun is?

LIZA. In the corner by the harmonium.

PROSSER. Well, well! And how did you find that out, Liza Hargest?

LIZA. Davy has asked me to come in twice weekly for the dusting.

[*DAVY gasps.*]

PROSSER. Is that so, Davy Jones?

DAVY [*after a gulp*]. It is.

PROSSER. You said the other day you wouldn't have busy-bodies about your house.

LIZA [*sweetly*]. Changed your mind, haven't you, Davy?

DAVY [*with murder in his heart*]. I have.

PROSSER. I can't understand you, Davy Jones.

DAVY [*saving face*]. It's not so easy to carry on without a woman, Prosser.

PROSSER [*in doorway; darkly*]. Nor *with* one, Davy Jones. But you know best.

[*He pauses, waiting for a reply, but DAVY is beyond words.*

Good morning.

[PROSSER *goes out, closing the door.*

DAVY. What the devil did you mean by that?

LIZA [*calmly*]. By what, Davy?

DAVY. Telling Prosser the gun was in the corner by the harmonium when you know it is behind the locker.

LIZA. Who said it was at Ty Coch?

DAVY. I had to—with Prosser nosing round.

LIZA. *You* were in a corner too, Davy—a tight corner, and remember Liza Hargest got you out of it.

DAVY. Haven't you any conscience at all? [*Mimicking*] 'Davy Jones has asked me to come in twice weekly.' Lie after lie!

LIZA. That isn't a lie.

DAVY. What?

LIZA. I *am* coming in.

DAVY. Don't you dare to set a foot inside Ty Coch.

LIZA. You told Prosser I was coming in.

DAVY. Never mind what I told Prosser; it's what I'm telling you. Hell, woman! Do you want to set all the village talking?

LIZA. They are talking now.

DAVY. What?

LIZA. Where do you think Prosser has gone?

DAVY. Where?

LIZA. Straight to the Post Office to check up if one of those there licences is yours. He's there by now. Can't you hear him, Davy? 'Have you heard the latest, Mrs Price? Liza Hargest is doing for Davy Jones twice weekly.'

DAVY. Oh, lord!

LIZA. And Maggie will say, 'There's news for you. Rice and confetti soon is it, Mr Prosser?'

DAVY. Shut up, woman. [*Crossing to door*] I'll teach them not to talk about me. I'll show them, and I'll show *you*, Liza Hargest, that I am not a man to be played with.

[*He opens the door, letting in FRED's song from the Lamp Room.*

When it's raining down at Cefn

There is snow at Dowlais Top . . .

DAVY [*exasperated*]. Stop that noise!

FRED [*off*]. Sorry, Mr Jones.

[*The telephone bell rings.*]

LIZA. The phone is ringing.

DAVY. Do you think I'm deaf? Answer the blasted thing—I'm going.

LIZA. Very well, Davy.

[*She rises.*]

DAVY. No, don't touch it! Don't touch it!

[*Crossing to phone.*]

LIZA. Whatever——

DAVY. I'll take it.

[*DAVY takes up the receiver.*]

Yes, what it it? Oh—five minutes late, you said. Right.

[*DAVY puts down the receiver.*]

That was a near thing.

LIZA. Whatever has come over you?

DAVY. If your voice had gone over the wire phone bells would be ringing in every 'box from Torpantau to Trefeinon—'Liza Hargest is in the 'box with Davy Jones,' that is what they would be saying.

LIZA. What's wrong with me being in the 'box?

DAVY. Use your sense, woman, for goodness' sake! The 10.45 has left Dowlais Top five minutes late. Will you please take your basket and wait on the platform?

LIZA. I am quite comfortable where I am, thank you.

DAVY. Will you take your basket, Mrs Hargest?

[*He puts basket on stool.*]

LIZA. A nerve you have got, Davy Jones, turning me out after making me welcome for weeks on end with your cups of tea.

DAVY. Shut up, will you?

LIZA. I will not. Coaxing women into your old 'box and then ordering them out as if they were dogs. Two faces you have, Davy Jones. One for week-days—one for Sundays. But wait till your best boots come creaking round the pews next Sunday—I'll expose you, Davy Jones, for what you are. A proper fool you will look standing there with the collecting-plate in your hand and guilt all over your face.

DAVY. What *am* I? Tell me that!

LIZA. Never you mind—but you will pay for it!

[*DAVY goes to sit on the centre stool, on which he has put the basket.*]

LIZA. Look where you are sitting, man.

DAVY. Oh, Jawch—there goes the basket.

[*The basket falls, and a large piece of pig-meat rolls out on the floor.*]

LIZA. And there goes my pig-meat.

DAVY [*picking up the meat*]. It's none the worse.

LIZA. None the worse! Why, man, it's covered with small coal.

DAVY. I'll wipe it off with a clean bit of waste.

LIZA. You can wipe it off with what you like—but you are buying it, Davy Jones.

DAVY. What?

LIZA. Ten shillings, Davy Jones, and we don't want any arguments.

DAVY. Daylight robbery! Look here, Liza—I'll wash it in the firebucket.

LIZA. Wash it in the water-works if you like, but ten shillings, please.

DAVY. You are a hard woman, Liza Hargest.

LIZA. Pay up, Davy Jones. [DAVY produces a ten-shilling note.

DAVY [*trying to save face*]. Well, a Sunday dinner is a Sunday dinner, I suppose. [He hands over the note.

LIZA. I hope the oven at Ty Coch is big enough.

DAVY. Never you mind the oven at Ty Coch—give me something to wrap the meat in. That flour-bag in your basket will do.

LIZA. Can't you see there are apples in it?

DAVY. Empty them out.

LIZA. Very well, but I want it back. [She empties apples into basket.] Don't turn your nose up—it's clean enough.

[DAVY puts the meat in the bag and crosses to locker.

DAVY. Please notice, Liza Hargest, that I am putting this meat in the locker for a special purpose. [He lifts the lid.] I don't want that boy to know that you are too clever for me. So don't mention the meat. [He closes the lid.] I don't want him laughing up his sleeve.

[Gongs from instrument box (a): one, two, three—one.

DAVY. The train has left Pontsticill, Liza Hargest. [He removes tablet from instrument box (a).] Since you refuse to leave the 'box, for the next ten minutes or so I must endure your company, and you must put up with mine. [He puts the tablet in pouch of carrier.] To make things easier, suppose we keep our mouths shut.

[He hangs carrier on peg near door.

LIZA. From this minute, Davy Jones. But look out when I open mine down in the village.

[LIZA *sits tight-lipped and with nose well elevated—a picture of injured dignity—on the stool centre. DAVY sits on stool by stove, his mouth shut like a rat-trap. A slight noise makes DAVY look towards the steps.*

FRED *tip-toes in.*

FRED [*in hoarse whisper*]. Look out, Mr Jones.

DAVY. What's the matter, boy?

FRED. That old bird. I've been watching him. He's been making up his mind. He'll be back any minute. Look! Can't you see anything?

[FRED *points out through window left.*

DAVY. No, nothing. You've got eyes like a hawk, boy.

FRED. Under the oak-tree—in the patch of thistles. Look at his top-nut—red as a turkey-cock.

DAVY [*exhaling venom*]. I see him.

LIZA [*rising*]. Where?

DAVY [*in an agony of suspense*]. Sit you down, Liza! Sit you down! I have waited a long time for this moment. So, if you never are silent again, shut your mouth now as if you were never going to open it again.

FRED. He's moving.

DAVY. See if anybody is about.

FRED [*crawls to doorway*]. All clear, Mr Jones. Stay where you are—I will come across with the gun.

LIZA. Lord have mercy!

DAVY. Quiet, woman!

FRED. Here's the gun. Look out! Here he comes!

[*A whirr of wings.*

[*Silence.*

[DAVY *raises the gun to his shoulder. He fires. LIZA screams and jumps backward.*

DAVY. Got him!

FRED. Dead as a door-nail.

LIZA. There's a fright you gave me.

FRED. I'll fetch him, Mr Jones. [FRED *runs down the steps.*

LIZA. A nice Sunday dinner, Davy Jones. Pity you bought the pig-meat.

DAVY. Would you have it back if I knocked a shilling off the price?

LIZA. Not if you knocked off *two* shillings.

FRED [*coming up the steps*]. He's a real beauty, Mr Jones. [*Entering*]
This year's bird; tender as a chicken.

LIZA. Lovely breast.

DAVY. Give it here.

LIZA. Can you feather, Davy Jones? Perhaps you would like me
to——

DAVY. I would *not*! [*Distant shouts are heard.*]
What's that?

LIZA. Only some men shouting, Davy.

DAVY. Listen! [*A police whistle is blown.*]

FRED [*on top of steps—peeping out*]. It's Prosser the Policeman.

DAVY. Devil take him!

FRED. And Morgan the Keeper. Oh!

DAVY. What is it, boy?

FRED. Pryce-Powell is with them—and the dogs. Prosser's
looking this way.

DAVY. Mind they don't see you.

LIZA. Your sins have found you out, Davy Jones.

FRED. The gun, Mr Jones.

DAVY. Blast the gun! Where can I put this pheasant?

FRED. The locker!

DAVY. They will look in there for sure. Slip down, boy, and bury
it in the coal under the 'box.

FRED. No time, Mr Jones. They are coming this way.

DAVY. Into the locker then!

[*DAVY moves to locker and lifts the lid.*]

LIZA. That is the first place Prosser will look.

DAVY. There's nowhere else.

FRED. They have gone into the Lamp Room.

LIZA. Give me that bird.

DAVY. Liza, what can you do with it?

LIZA. Give it here. [*DAVY hands her the pheasant.*]

Plenty of room in my basket. Just wrap the tail round and it fits
quite comfortable. Spread the oil-cloth over the top and—there you
are!

DAVY. Well, I'll be——

LIZA. Nobody would suspect *me* of shooting a pheasant.

DAVY. Bless you, Liza Hargest.

LIZA. Don't mention it, Davy. When do I start?

DAVY. Start where?

LIZA. At Ty Coch.

DAVY [*capitulating with a groan*]. When you like!

FRED. The gun, Mr Jones. Quick!

DAVY. Stick it behind the locker.

[*FRED ducks past the doorway and puts gun behind locker.*
He looks out.

FRED [*as if in pain*]. Oh!

DAVY. What is it now?

FRED. The beaters. They are spreading out from the Plas Wood.
We are surrounded.

DAVY. Lord help us!

[*DAVY sits on stool near stove.*

FRED. Morgan and Pryce-Powell have gone to the oak-tree with
the dogs.

DAVY. Dogs?

FRED. Two cockers, a black retriever, and a red setter. Oh, hell!

DAVY. Tell me, boy.

FRED. The red setter has got his nose up. He's marking.

DAVY. Marking what?

FRED. The cabbage-patch!

DAVY. That's done it! We are caught, Liza Hargest.

LIZA. We? *You!*

FRED. They are trampling down the cabbages.

DAVY. Come from there, boy. I can't stand any more.

FRED. Oh, Jawch! Morgan's picked up a handful of feathers.
Pryce-Powell has gone purple in the face. Here comes Potter.

[*POTTER comes up steps at the trot.*

POTTER. Had to pop up, Dave. Couldn't let you go without
saying good-bye.

DAVY. *Good-bye?*

POTTER. Bear up, Dave. It won't be more than six months, so the
boys say. What made you so brazen, Davy? Why couldn't you wait
until the guns began to pop? Taking the first shot—asking for
trouble, that was. But don't worry, Dave.

DAVY. Don't worry?

POTTER. I'll look after your garden when you go down; and take
your dog out for a walk. So-long, Dave. Swansea isn't a bad place
for a holiday. Bear up, old boy.

[*POTTER runs down steps.*

LIZA. And if the worst comes to the worst, I will look after Ty Coch.

DAVY. Gaol or no gaol, I can't stand this. [*He rises and moves to window—shouting.*] Get out of those cabbages! What do you think you are doing?

MORGAN [*off*]. You will find out soon enough.

DAVY. Get those dogs off the line, or they will be mince-meat in a few minutes. The 10.45 is due.

PRYCE-POWELL [*off*]. Whistle the dogs in, Morgan.

[*MORGAN whistles.*]

MORGAN [*off*]. They won't listen. They're on scent. Must be a runner.

PRYCE-POWELL [*off*]. You, there! Set the distance signal. Can't you hear me?

[*A pointless question—the dead could hear.*]

DAVY. Don't say I haven't warned you!

PRYCE-POWELL [*off*]. Of all the damned impertinence!

[*Sound of running footsteps.*]

FRED. That's done it! Here's Pryce-Powell.

DAVY. Let him come.

PRYCE-POWELL [*on steps*]. Infernal impudence! [*He enters.*] Do you know who I am?

DAVY. I am only doing my duty.

PRYCE-POWELL. *Duty*, you fool? Stop the train!

DAVY. Not without orders.

PRYCE-POWELL. I am *giving* them.

DAVY. Orders from Oswestry, I mean.

PRYCE-POWELL. The dogs, man!

DAVY. They oughtn't to be on the line.

PRYCE-POWELL [*shouting*]. Constable—come up here.

PROSSER [*on steps*]. Sir!

PRYCE-POWELL. You'll regret this behaviour, my man, before you are much older. Come in, Prosser. This fool of a man refuses to set the signal against the train. I want you to be a witness to that, in case anything happens to the dogs.

PROSSER. Very good, sir.

DAVY. And I want you to witness that I am being interfered with in the execution of my duty.

LIZA. I will swear to that, Davy.

PRYCE-POWELL. Who are you?

LIZA [*happily*]. Davy Jones's housekeeper.

PROSSER. Davy Jones, when a magistrate gives an order it is wise to obey it.

DAVY. Magistrate or no magistrate, he's got no right in this 'box. [*An engine whistles in the distance.*]

PRYCE-POWELL [*frantic*]. Pull the lever, will you!

DAVY. Pull it yourself.

PRYCE-POWELL. Which one?

DAVY. No, you don't!

PROSSER. Stay where you are, Davy Jones. Here, boy. Pull that lever.

DAVY. Don't you, Fred.

FRED. Better do it, Mr Jones.

[*FRED pulls lever.*]

DAVY. You'll be sorry for this, Prosser.

PRYCE-POWELL. That's that! Keep an eye on him, constable, until we get the dogs off the line. No knowing what the fool may do. [*Train in distance can be heard pulling up.*]

[*PRYCE-POWELL runs down steps.*]

PROSSER. The train is pulling up, Davy Jones. Lucky for you, that is. A pretty penny it would have cost the Railway if anything had happened to Pryce-Powell's gun-dogs.

DAVY. Remove yourself from this 'box, Prosser—before I lose my temper.

PROSSER. No hurry. There is another matter to be attended to. Davy Jones, they've got the dogs on the lead. You can let the train in.

DAVY. Very well, Prosser. But I hold you responsible for the delay.

PROSSER. Pull the lever, man.

[*DAVY resets signal lever.*]

[*The train pulls in.*]

DAVY. Take the tablet, boy.

FRED. Very good, Mr Jones.

[*FRED goes down the steps.*]

Come on, Mrs Hargest.

LIZA. Good morning, Davy Jones. Good morning, Mr Prosser.

PROSSER. Don't forget your basket.

LIZA. Would you believe it! Fancy leaving it behind! Thank you, Mr Prosser.

PROSSER. Brecon, is it?

LIZA. Market.

PROSSER. Back on the 5.30, I take it?

LIZA. That's right.

PROSSER. I'll be meeting it, Mrs Hargest.

LIZA. Oh!

PROSSER. There are a few questions I want to put to you.

LIZA. Delighted, I'm sure, Mr Prosser.

FRED [*shouting*]. Come on, Mrs Hargest, if you want the train.

LIZA. Coming, boy bach. [LIZA, with basket, goes down steps.

[*Guard's whistle.*

[*Train pulls out.*

PROSSER. Don't let me disturb you, Davy Jones. See to your business.

[DAVY resets levers.

PRYCE-POWELL [*on steps*]. Extraordinary! No other word for it, Morgan.

MORGAN [*entering with PRYCE-POWELL*]. Something fishy about it, sir, if you ask me. Where did those feathers come from?

PROSSER. And where did the shot come from? Perhaps you could help us, Davy Jones.

DAVY. What shot?

PROSSER. I am asking the questions, Davy Jones.

DAVY. Then you can answer them.

PRYCE-POWELL. That kind of talk will get you nowhere, my man. There *was* a shot, and it came from this direction. We were some distance away; you were on the spot. If we heard it you must have heard it.

DAVY. It might have been a fog-signal.

PROSSER. It might. But there's no fog, Davy Jones.

DAVY. No—there isn't, is there?

PROSSER. No, there isn't.

MORGAN. The feathers, sir.

PRYCE-POWELL. What's that? Oh, yes. Can you explain how a cock-pheasant came to be half-feathered in your cabbage-patch?

DAVY. Been roosting there, I expect.

PRYCE-POWELL. Do you agree with that, Morgan?

MORGAN. No, sir. No droppings.

PRYCE-POWELL. So *that* tale won't do, my man.

MORGAN. He is guilty. Look at his face.

PROSSER. No objection to me taking a look round, I suppose, Davy Jones?

DAVY. You've no right without the Company's permission.

PRYCE-POWELL. Carry on, constable. I will take the responsibility.

DAVY. I will remember that.

PROSSER. Not many hiding-places, I must say. [*He is moving round.*] Nothing behind the levers. What about the locker, I wonder? Padlocked, as usual, I notice. What's this behind it? Well, fancy that now!

PRYCE-POWELL. What is it, constable?

PROSSER [*leaning over and picking up gun*]. A gun, sir.

PRYCE-POWELL. Whose gun is it?

PROSSER. I wonder, now. It can't be yours, of course, Davy Jones. *Your* gun is in the corner by the harmonium.

PRYCE-POWELL. What the devil has the harmonium to do with it?

PROSSER. Perhaps Davy Jones will be kind enough to enlighten us.

DAVY. The gun is mine.

PROSSER. Is it, now? Fancy that!

DAVY. I've owned up—so get out!

PROSSER. Not so fast, Davy Jones. Wait for me to get my note-book.

DAVY. Going to charge me, are you?

PROSSER. I am. I charge you, Davy Jones, with carrying a gun without a licence. [*He writes in note-book.*]

DAVY. Have you seen me carrying it?

PROSSER. No. And I can't see it walking from Ty Coch, either.

DAVY. Very clever, Prosser. I hope this will get you promotion, and a move to Scotland Yard! That would be worth the five shillings and costs.

PRYCE-POWELL. Five *pounds* and costs!

DAVY. What!

PROSSER. Have you forgotten, Davy Jones, that Mr Pryce-Powell is Chairman of the Magistrates?

DAVY. Where can I get five pounds?

PROSSER. Sell the harmonium.

MORGAN. Let me see the gun.

[*PROSSER hands the gun to MORGAN, who opens the breech.*]

MORGAN. I thought so; it's loaded. Ah!

PRYCE-POWELL. What is it, Morgan?

MORGAN. One cartridge fired. [*He sniffs into the breech.*] Within the last few minutes, too. I can smell the powder.

PROSSER. So the game is up, Davy Jones. I have my note-book ready. You had better confess.

DAVY. I am saying nothing.

PROSSER. Very well. So we must find the body, Davy Jones.

DAVY. What body?

PROSSER. What is in the locker?

DAVY. That's my business.

PROSSER. Where is the key?

DAVY. In my other coat.

PROSSER. No, it isn't. [*He thrust a hand into DAVY's pocket.*] It is here in your waistcoat pocket. Thank you, Davy Jones.

DAVY. You can't do this, Prosser.

PROSSER. I *am* doing it!

DAVY. Without a warrant!

MORGAN. Look! On the floor.

[*He picks up a feather.*]

PRYCE-POWELL. A feather! That settles it. Open that locker, constable.

DAVY. I've warned you, remember.

PRYCE-POWELL. Take no notice of him.

[*PROSSER unlocks locker, and throws open the lid.*]

Well?

PROSSER. It's here right enough—wrapped up in a flour-bag.

PRYCE-POWELL. Well, get it out, get it out!

[*PROSSER picks up the flour-bag and looks inside.*]

My word, signal-man, you will pay for this! Of all the brazen-faced effrontery—shooting a pheasant under my very nose. Get it out of the bag, constable. What are you waiting for? Why don't you speak? Have you had a stroke—or what?

PROSSER. It's . . . It's . . .

PRYCE-POWELL. It's what?

PROSSER. A lump of pig-meat.

PRYCE-POWELL. Well, I'll be damned!

DAVY. Take a good look, Prosser. You might have made a mistake.

PROSSER. I would have sworn. . . .

[*The pig-meat drops to the floor.*]

DAVY. What do you think you are doing—bowling my Sunday dinner all over the floor?

PRYCE-POWELL. It seems you have made a fool of me, constable, as well as of yourself. Pick up the meat, man. [PROSSER *picks it up*.

DAVY. Give it here. [*He takes the meat from PROSSER.*] I thought so. [*He sniffs.*] Smells of oil.

PROSSER. It's none the worse, man.

DAVY. Then keep it yourself.

PROSSER. What!

DAVY. I've got no stomach for it after it being mauled about like that. It will cost you a pound, Prosser. That's what I paid for it.

PROSSER. A pound! I don't want it.

DAVY. You've got to have it all the same. Pay up!

PRYCE-POWELL. Don't quarrel about it. Perhaps we were a little rash in jumping to conclusions—but, here is your pound, and we will forget what has happened. [*He gives DAVY a pound note.*

DAVY [*grimly*]. Very kind of you.

PRYCE-POWELL. Come along then, Morgan. We will put the beaters through the Plas Wood.

[PRYCE-POWELL and MORGAN are moving to door.

DAVY. Wait a minute.

PRYCE-POWELL. Well?

DAVY. You have accused an innocent man, and aided and abetted in a search without a warrant. Bad enough for an ordinary man to do a thing like that, but when it comes to a magistrate misusing his privileges—well, I would not like to be in your shoes, Pryce-Powell.

PRYCE-POWELL. Don't be ridiculous!

DAVY. You'll see who is ridiculous when I tell my story to the Bench.

PRYCE-POWELL. What Bench?

DAVY. The one you are Chairman of—when Prosser has me up for carrying a gun without a licence.

PRYCE-POWELL. Good heavens! Morgan.

MORGAN. Sir.

PRYCE-POWELL. Collect the beaters and give them their orders.

MORGAN. Very good, sir.

[MORGAN goes down steps.

PRYCE-POWELL [*in doorway*]. Just a moment, constable.

PROSSER. Yes, sir.

PRYCE-POWELL. Come outside a moment.

[*Murmur of voices from platform outside door—then*
PROSSER'S—'So there's nothing else to be done, sir.'

PRYCE-POWELL. Good morning, signal-man. Prosser will tell you how much we regret the mistake. Good morning.

[PRYCE-POWELL goes down steps.

[PROSSER comes in and clears his throat.

DAVY. Got the note-book out again, I see. What are you going to charge me with this time?

PROSSER. Have you such a thing as a rubber?

DAVY. A *what*?

PROSSER. There is an entry in my book that I would like to rub out.

DAVY. About the matter of a gun licence, would it be?

PROSSER. It would.

DAVY. There's a rubber on my desk. I'll lend it to you with pleasure, Mr Prosser.

PROSSER. Thank you.

[PROSSER makes an erasure.

Davy Jones!

DAVY. Well?

PROSSER. I don't want to put a damper on your rejoicings, but I would like to remind you that to-day is to-day and to-morrow is to-morrow.

DAVY. Meaning what?

PROSSER. Never you mind. [*He moves to door.*] Good morning, Davy Jones.

[PROSSER goes down steps.

DAVY [*shouting*]. Your meat, Mr Prosser.

PROSSER [*shouting*]. Give it to that half-starved dog of yours.

FRED [*off*]. Good morning, Mr Prosser.

[*He has a new inspiration. . .*

Now the Railway keeps its lamp-boys

As happy as the day,

By working extra hours

Without no extra pay.

DAVY [*to himself*]. That boy will be singing at his own funeral. [*Loud*] Come up here, boy.

FRED [*off*]. Yes, Mr Jones.

[FRED comes up the steps.

[*Entering*] They are all gone, Mr Jones.

DAVY. Reach me the fire-bucket.

FRED. Which one?

DAVY. The one with the water in it.

[FRED brings one of the fire-buckets which hang against wall on top of steps.]

DAVY. I'll have it here by my stool, boy. I want to wash this piece of meat. Once the dirt and the small coal are off it it will be as good as ever. You want to be more careful when you bring coal up—not to get it over the floor.

[DAVY sits on stool centre, with the bucket before him.]

FRED. There's a hole in the bucket, Mr Jones.

DAVY. Put an old time-table in the bottom, boy bach.

FRED. Yes, Mr Jones. A close shave it was this morning. I thought they had got us for sure.

DAVY. It wasn't so bad as all that, boy. I had the situation in hand all the time.

FRED. Yes, Mr Jones.

DAVY. Now, there's a lesson for you, Fred, to keep your head whatever happens. There is always a way out so long as you keep cool and think quick. Did you notice how I saw a way to make use of Liza's basket?

FRED [*doubtfully*]. Yes, Mr Jones.

DAVY. It was easy after that. Once we had got rid of the bird we were safe, because you can always depend on Prosser putting his foot into it.

FRED. Into the basket, Mr Jones?

DAVY. No, no, boy. Into . . . into . . . why the devil do you ask such silly questions, boy? Now, look at this piece of meat. I bought it off Liza Hargest for ten shillings. She wanted twelve-and-six, but I bargained her down.

[*At this point LIZA HARGEST, who has crept up the steps quietly, shows herself in doorway.*]

I sold it to Prosser for a pound, at a profit of ten shillings, and I made him so angry he wouldn't take it. That's business, Fred—ten shillings pocket-money and the meat for nothing.

FRED. Pity you haven't got the pheasant as well.

DAVY. You leave that to me, boy. Liza Hargest will soon be in Brecon Market selling that bird. She'll get fifteen shillings for it if she gets a penny. I will let her keep five shillings for herself. It pays to be generous sometimes, boy bach.

FRED. Mr Jones.

DAVY. Aye?

FRED. Liza Hargest.

DAVY. What about her?

FRED. She's engaged!

DAVY [*exploding*]. Don't you mention that word. Potter put you up to it, did he? He will be glad to try his jokes on somebody else after I lay my hands on him. If you hear that tale again, boy, say it's a lie. Liza Hargest and Davy Jones are *not* engaged—and never will be.

FRED. No, no, Mr Jones. It's not that. I only wanted to tell you that Liza didn't go on the train.

DAVY. What are you talking about, boy?

FRED. Liza Hargest, Mr Jones. She went into the 'Ladies Waiting' and locked herself in until Prosser and Pryce-Powell had gone.

DAVY. Never!

LIZA. That's right, Davy, and you didn't think of *that*.

DAVY. Liza Hargest!

LIZA. Yes, it's me, Davy. I can't stop now, much as I would like to. I've got this bird to feather.

DAVY [*echoing like an imbecile*]. Bird to feather . . .

LIZA. The pheasant, Davy, for your Sunday dinner.

DAVY. Sunday dinner . . .

LIZA. That's right, Davy bach, and I will come across to Ty Coch to cook it for you on Sunday morning. I must hurry now. Good morning, Davy. Good morning, Fred. Lovely day!

[LIZA goes down the steps, humming happily.
[Silence.]

DAVY [*in despair*]. Lovely day!

[The meat drops into the bucket with a splash.

[A slight pause.]

FRED. That meat wasn't so cheap after all, Mr Jones.

CURTAIN

The Affected Young Ladies

By Janet Dunbar

*A Comedy based on the theme of Molière's
"Les Précieuses Ridicules"*

Copyright 1956 by Janet Dunbar

CHARACTERS

NORTON }
EARLWOOD } *friends: sons of London merchants*
CRESSWELL, *a middle-aged, prosperous countryman*
CLARE, *his daughter; eighteen*
JENNY, *his niece, to whom he is also guardian; nineteen*
GANDER, *their young maid*
MARQUIS OF MODBURY
BARON YARNER

NOTE: A number of gramophone records exist of music suitable to the period; one suggestion is Columbia DB2282, for airs on the pipes; but there are others listed in record catalogues.

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

The Affected Young Ladies

The scene is a drawing-room on the ground floor of a seventeenth-century London house. There are double doors at the back, C., and a bay window with elaborately draped curtains at L. Sofa at R.C. obliquely set. Chairs at L.C. and L., and an occasional table in bay. Console tables at either side of doors.

Small silver salver and a lace fan on console table R. Hat with feather, and silver-topped stick, on console table L. Silver tray with decanter of wine and glasses, silver-stoppered bottle of smelling-salts, and a few calf-bound books on table in bay, also man's hat at upper end.

At rise of curtain, double doors are open. The sound of music in the street comes up fitfully through bay window. EARLWOOD and NORTON, two personable young men in good but unelaborate costume, are discovered standing mid-stage and several paces apart. They have just been bowing out some ladies, and are now turned front. NORTON, at L., is fuming and tapping his toe; EARLWOOD, mouth open, is flabbergasted. After a moment, girls' laughter is heard off-stage C. Together the two men swing round to one another.

NORTON. Monstrous! }
EARLWOOD. Damme! } together.

[They both stride up C., where the doors are suddenly closed in their faces. EARLWOOD turns front and laughs.

NORTON. Upon my word, Earlwood, what do you think of that? *[With an angry glance at the other]* It's no matter for laughter, sir!

EARLWOOD *[smiling]*. A pretty exhibition, Norton—a pretty exhibition indeed. They could not have swept out in greater style if they had been on the boards of Drury Lane.

NORTON. Did you ever see such high-held noses, such hoity-toity eyebrows——

EARLWOOD [*taking out snuff-box in leisurely fashion*]. But you must admit they looked ravishing with it all.

[*The street music, which has been playing quietly up to now, suddenly blares into a new tune.*]

NORTON [*striding to window, opening it, and shouting out*]. Go away, confound you, go away! [*Music stops momentarily, then wails out an excruciating medley. He takes coins from pocket and throws them to unseen musicians.*] Go away, I tell you! Cease that caterwauling! [*Music dies down: he bangs window shut.*] A fitting serenade for the ladies, no doubt. [*Turning*] Mr Earlwood, I ask you, sir. Did you ever see a couple of country wenches give themselves such airs as these, or treat two honourable lovers with more contempt?

EARLWOOD [*laughing, and strolling over to Norton with open snuff-box*]. It was quite a charming sight.

NORTON [*politely but impatiently refusing snuff*]. Why, they had not even the manners to ask us to be seated. [*Crossing EARLWOOD and sitting in chair L.C.*] And when we began our civilities they took to whispering and yawning, with hardly a moment's attention to our conversation, and not a word to throw to us.

EARLWOOD [*taking snuff himself*]. Except to inquire whether we knew Lord-this or Sir Willoughy-that—who have already left cards, so my man told me this morning.

[*Replaces snuff-box in pocket and dusts himself.*]

NORTON. Your man told you?

EARLWOOD. Servants gossip even more than their betters. My man's ears alone are worth his wages. [*Stops to glance at doors.*] He tells me that round the gaming-tables report has already multiplied Mr Cresswell's comfortable income into a fortune.

NORTON. So! Before another week is out all the fops in town will be strutting it here and teaching Miss Clare Cresswell and her cousin Jenny how to lady it with the rest.

EARLWOOD [*crossing behind NORTON to up R. and picking up fan from console table*]. Why, damme, one visit to the play and two walks in St James's Park have given them a taste for every foolery of fashion. [*Flicking open the fan, then closing and throwing it down again*] My dear Norton, it looks as if we must say adieu to these charming young ladies, in spite of their father's blessing. [*Going down R.*] Oh, you'll recover from the blow to your pride—

NORTON. But, confound it, I'm fond of Jenny! Aren't you of Clare?

EARLWOOD [*reflectively*]. I had a strong desire to put her over my knee, face downward, and to deal with her as her nurse should have done at an earlier age. That may be fondness: I do not know.

[*Enter CRESSWELL. Robust and spirited, he is obviously pleased to see the young men. NORTON rises.*]

CRESSWELL [*jovially*]. Good morning, gentlemen.

[*He bows, then puts hat and stick on console table R.*]

NORTON [*bowing*]. Good morning, sir.

EARLWOOD [*bowing*]. Your servant, Mr Cresswell.

CRESSWELL [*coming c.*]. So you've called to see m'daughter and m'niece, eh? Excellent, excellent! [*Rubs his hands.*] Pretty girls, both of 'em, don't you agree?

EARLWOOD. Very pretty, sir.

CRESSWELL [*beaming*]. And they'll have more than looks to bring to the marriage settlement, as I told both your fathers. [*Waves to sofa and chair L.*] I pray you, gentlemen, be seated. [*With mute acknowledgment of their host's courtesy, but not at all at ease, EARLWOOD sits on R. end of sofa, and NORTON in chair L.*] 'Yes, I'll ballast 'em handsomely, never fear,' I said to your fathers. [*Sitting on chair L.C.*] 'Now that my poor wife's no longer here to keep 'em in order,' I said, 'I'm finding 'em a handful.' So we settled I should bring 'em to London next time I had business in the City. And we arranged that you two gentlemen should call and pay your respects, and in due and proper time we'd make a double match of it. Eh? Eh? Ha! ha!

[*Slaps his knee.*]

EARLWOOD. You found, sir, that the young ladies were willing to leave their quiet country home for the noise and fret of London?

CRESSWELL [*laughing*]. Willing! Why, they're always badgering me to bring 'em! Ever since they met a parcel of dandified folk that came to stay at the Manor House, and heard about the routs and swarries and such-like nonsense that goes on in London, they spend half their time stuffing their heads with tales of dukes and duchesses.

NORTON. Not wholesome reading, sir, if I may venture the opinion.

CRESSWELL. As to that, sir, I don't know, not having read a book in m'life save m'Bible and the ledgers in my counting-house. But when it came to my daughter asking was I quite sure there wasn't a title in the family—on *either* side of the blanket—well, I knew it was time to do something about getting 'em a good, steady husband apiece. [*Looking benignly from one to the other*] And so it's settled?

NORTON [*hesitatingly, as he rises*]. On the contrary, sir, I must tell you that we have not been well received.

CRESSWELL. What? What? What's this?

EARLWOOD [*lamely, as he rises*]. The young ladies do not show any signs of interest in us, sir. [*With marked irony*] Of course, we are not dukes or baronets——

NORTON [*taking up his hat from console table L. and smoothing out its solitary feather*]. It is a great pity, sir, that we are merely the unfashionable sons of merchants.

EARLWOOD. Yes, indeed it is a pity, sir, as I think your daughter—— [*Breaks off.*]

CRESSWELL [*rising*]. Yes, yes, you think my daughter——

EARLWOOD [*R. of sofa*].—Would make a delightful wife if she had perhaps a little—just a little—more sense.

CRESSWELL. But you don't want sense in a wife! What next!

EARLWOOD. Why, sir, if one can coax out the foolishness, there will surely be a space left empty?

CRESSWELL [*going to EARLWOOD*]. Dangerous to fill it, sir. Most unwise. [*Going up behind sofa*] What you must do with women is to make 'em rely absolutely on *our* opinion. In other words, do what they're told. Once you've got that into their heads there won't be much room for *sense*. [*Turning and seeing GANDER, who has entered and is solemnly holding one of the doors open*] Eh, eh, what do you want?

GANDER. I've to show these gentlemen out, sir.

CRESSWELL. The devil you have! At whose orders, pray?

GANDER. The young ladies' orders, sir. They're expecting company.

CRESSWELL. And you may expect a shaking if you don't close the door this instant. [*As she does not move, he takes a step towards her.*] You silly sheep of a ploughman's daughter, you! They've made you as foolish as themselves since they took you out of your cottage and brought you along to run about at their bidding. [*Going towards her as she still stands irresolute*] Shut the door, I say!

GANDER. Yes, sir!

[*Promptly obeys, and occupies herself dusting console tables.*]

NORTON [*speaking stiffly and going towards door*]. We do not wish to inconvenience the young ladies, sir.

CRESSWELL [*following him*]. What—you're going? But you'll

return, Mr Norton? [*Norton gives slight shrug and moves quickly to GANDER to rescue his hat, which she has taken from table in bay and is vigorously rubbing with her apron.*] Mr Norton, sir, I'll give them a talking-to. Yes, I promise I'll give them a piece of my mind they won't forget.

NORTON [*angrily straightening feather on his hat*]. They would assuredly be the better for it, sir.

[*Has some difficulty in getting the feather into its proper position again.*]

CRESSWELL [*intercepting EARLWOOD, who is on his way to the door*]. I'll make them see reason, Mr Earlwood. Only give me time and I'll teach them a lesson.

EARLWOOD [*taking up his hat and stick from console table L.*]. A lesson is the one thing they require to be quite enchanting.

[*Moves to door.*]

CRESSWELL [*following him, almost dancing with chagrin*]. Then you'll come again? [EARLWOOD makes a gesture which says, 'What's the use?'] I'll see my daughter—I'll speak to my niece! I'll show 'em they can't treat two fine young men in such a high-handed fashion!

EARLWOOD [*in doorway*]. We are sensible of your civility, sir.

CRESSWELL [*crossing to NORTON*]. I'll bring 'em to reason. You can assuredly count on me, gentlemen.

NORTON [*in doorway*]. Good day, sir.

[*Bows and exits to L.*]

EARLWOOD [*in doorway*]. Your servant, sir.

[*Bows and follows NORTON.*]

[CRESSWELL bows in return, and GANDER, who during the scene has been busy with unnecessary dusting while stealing looks at the young gentlemen, puts in a little polite practice and bows too, though no one is taking any notice of her. CRESSWELL follows NORTON and EARLWOOD off, to show them out. Their voices are heard in the hall, CRESSWELL still protesting. GANDER runs to the door to watch their departure, essaying another bow. As door closes off L. she darts to window. Then she decides to slip away before her master returns. but as she gets to the door CRESSWELL stumps in. She retreats a little before him.]

CRESSWELL [*in doorway*]. Where are your mistresses?

GANDER. In their closet, sir.

CRESSWELL. What are they doing?

GANDER. Making pomatum for their lips, sir.

CRESSWELL [to C.]. Pomatum! Pomatum! I'll give 'em pomatum! Go and bid 'em come down here at once!

[GANDER takes a step to go, then stops like a hypnotized rabbit as CRESSWELL swings round to her and begins storming again.]

All their lives they've washed their faces in buttermilk, and now there's naught but talk of pomatum, and ochre, and the rest of such rubbish. [Pointing to doors] Well? Didn't I tell you to send 'em down here? Go on, girl! Scuttle!

[She scuttles off to R. In doorway, calling after her as she mounts stairs]. And tell 'em to hurry! Hurry! [Crossing down R.] I'll teach 'em to make pomatum. Bah! Fooleries! [Crossing to L.] Pomatum—tscha! I'll give 'em some pomatum they won't forget, and it won't be on their faces.

[CLARE and JENNY appear in doorway. CLARE is on L. They are young, high-spirited country girls, who would be quite sensible if they hadn't been dazzled by modish London.]

[Going up to L.C.] Fripperies! Vanities! Foppery! [Seeing girls] Oh, there you are, miss! And you too, miss! Come in here, the pair of you!

[He takes a step to L. as CLARE and JENNY enter timidly. Well? [Indicating sofa] Be seated! Be seated!

[Girls quickly cross and sit, CLARE on L.]

[Coming C., to CLARE] Now, miss!

CLARE. Yes, Father?

CRESSWELL. Will you please be so good as to inform me what you have said to these gentlemen, that they have gone off so offended? Did I not tell you that they were the husbands I had chosen for you both?

CLARE [smiling sweetly: she can do what she likes with her father]. Yes, in truth you did, Father, and that is what decided us not to have anything to say to them. What a notion—to begin immediately with matrimony.

CRESSWELL. What would you have 'em begin with—wenching? Damme, what are girls coming to, nowadays! Here are two excellent young men, come to declare their intentions in the properest manner, and you aren't satisfied. [To JENNY, shaking his finger angrily]

You too, miss! You're as bad as your cousin! Don't you want to get settled in life?

JENNY. Lord, Uncle, you begin at the wrong end. If a girl should resign herself to matrimony at the first time of asking, what then would become of romance?

CLARE. Faith, one would never have a lover. Only a husband.

CRESSWELL. And is not that better than having only a lover, and never a husband? I tell you matrimony is the only honest estate to begin with, to go on with, and to end with! Zounds, you should be down on your knees thanking Heaven you have suitors with fair designs—and it's more than you deserve, you hussies!

[*He turns up c.*

CLARE. Why, Father, you talk like a Cheapside citizen.

CRESSWELL [*returning down c.*]. And what do you know of Cheapside citizens, eh?

CLARE. Indeed, such a one was heartily laughed at in the play we saw yesternight. Do you not remember?

CRESSWELL. I remember that a good and worthy fellow was mocked at for no cause in that foolish stage-piece.

JENNY [*prinking out her dress and examining it admiringly*]. Lord, Uncle, was he not a monstrous sight? No ribbons at his knee, and his lace a paltry ham-frill. One could see that he had been long sunk in matrimony.

[*Twirls her satins with satisfaction.*

CRESSWELL [*going L.*]. You got that gem of philosophy out of one of your silly books, I'll be bound.

[*Glares at books on table in bay window.*

JENNY [*tripping to CRESSWELL and lightly swinging him round; on his L.*]. Do not abuse our books, Guardian—they are full of wisdom. [*Pausing for a moment, then going on as if she had learnt a piece*] A lover, to be agreeable, must understand how to utter fine sentiments, how to sigh forth the soft, the tender, the passionate. And his addresses should be according to the rules.

CLARE [*rising and running to R. of CRESSWELL*]. In the first place, he should behold, either at church or in the Park or in some other public place, the person of whom he becomes enamoured. He seeks an introduction. He is thwarted! He sinks into a pensive melancholy.

JENNY. But at last he is successful. He knows her name, he touches her hand! But he conceals his passion until the exact moment of opportunity. Then—in the proper place, of course: a shady garden

or a terrace in the moonlight—he declares himself. Consternation from the lady! Anon, flashing anger!

CRESWELL [*moving straight down*]. Bah!

CLARE [*following him*]. But, Father, the anger does not last indefinitely. After he has been banished from her presence he finds a way to pacify her, to accustom her to hear his passion, and at last to confess—reluctantly, of course—that she is not insensible to it.

JENNY [*excitedly, on his L.*]. Then follow the adventures! His meeting with a rival; there must necessarily be a rival.

CLARE. The persecution of fathers——

CRESWELL. What?

JENNY. The jealousies arising from misunderstandings——

CLARE. The complainings—the despairs—the running-off with——

JENNY. And its consequences——

CLARE. But to put one's finger straight into the wedding-ring! To make no love but by making the marriage contract! [*Going away to C.*] Why, 'tis taking romance by the tail!

CRESWELL [*turning to JENNY*]. What the devil nonsense is this?

JENNY. My cousin is in the right, sir. How can one receive such dull suitors who do not know the a, b, or c of proper courtship?

CRESWELL [*going to CLARE, C.*]. What, were they dumb?

CLARE. La, no, Father, they could articulate. They spoke of the weather.

CRESWELL. And a valuable ground of conversation that is, damme. At home 'tis the prime theme of any gathering.

CLARE. True, Father. But in London weather is not genteel. It brought me back home to hear: 'Rain is about, madam.' And 'Think you the wind will drop, Miss Jenny?'

CRESWELL. This is better than glib flatteries, or boastings, or scandals. [*Turning to Jenny*] What more have you got against these honest-spoken young men?

JENNY. To come upon a love-visit with a leg entirely unadorned, and a hat almost destitute of feathers! [*She sinks on chair L.*] Heavens, what lovers are these!

CLARE [*going R. of sofa, where she stands with left hand held up to enable her to arrange the sleeve ruffle*]. For my part, I cannot endure the thought of lying by a man in a nightshirt, knowing that when he rises to walk abroad with me his breeches will not be wide enough for the fashion by half a foot, not to mention an indigence of ribbons.

CRESSWELL [*taking step towards her and shaking his fist*]. Oh, that your mother were alive to whip you! I'd do it myself, only I fear I'd break my cane! Nightshirts—breeches—are these articles a modest country wench should know about before she's married? You need a husband to cure your pertness, miss. [*Swinging round to JENNY*] And so do you. [*Going angrily up R. and taking hat and cane from console table, then turning to them*] I am now going to Mr Norton's and Mr Earlwood's lodgings, to tell them that you are waiting to receive them in a sober frame of mind. [*Banging hat on head*] Then I shall go on to the coffee-house to have a pipe of tobacco with my friends, to cool myself. [*Going to door*] If you haven't come to reason by the time I return, the pair of you, I—I—I'll—[*shaking stick at them*] You provoking hussies, I'll—
[*Turns and exits without completing his threat.*]

JENNY [*luxuriously settling herself in chair*]. What will he do, cousin, if we have not come to reason by the time he returns?

CLARE [*laughing, going to behind sofa*]. He will continue his discourse on model matrimony, and will continue, also, to give way to us, as ever.
[*Enter GANDER, flustered and excited.*]

GANDER. Here's a coach driv up to the door, Miss Clare, and two gentlemen getting out. [JENNY rises.]

CLARE [*taking step towards GANDER*]. Gentlemen? What kind of gentlemen? Quality?

GANDER. I dunno, Miss Clare. They're dressed very pretty, with a deal of ribbons—like the poodle you have at home, Miss Clare, that the master can't abide.

[JENNY goes quickly to window and looks out.]

CLARE [*angrily*]. I told you not to call me 'Miss Clare.' You must call me 'Madam.'

GANDER. Yes, Miss Clare.

JENNY [*stopping looking out*]. Quick, Gander, be ready to open the door. [GANDER makes to go.]

CLARE. Here! Here! [*Picking up salver from console table R. and giving it*] Take the silver saucer in your hand to receive their cards. Hurry, booby! [GANDER exits to L.]

JENNY. They have got down from their coach—they are mounting the steps. Oh, what beautiful creatures!

CLARE [*prinking*]. Are their feathers fine?

JENNY. Prodigiously.

CLARE. And have they an elegance of lace?

JENNY. Oh, cascades.

CLARE. And ribbons? Are they adorned with ribbons?

JENNY. Flutterings of ribbons.

CLARE. I trust they are *Sirs*, Jenny. I'll not be satisfied with cards from less than a *Sir*.

[GANDER *reappears, quickly closing the door behind her.*

Well, well, have they left cards?

GANDER. No, Miss Clare.

CLARE. *Madam!*

GANDER. Yes, Miss Clare—no, Miss Clare. They ask permission to pay their respects in person.

CLARE. But their names! Did they not give their names?

JENNY. Are they the gentlemen who have already left cards this morning—Sir Willoughby something?

GANDER. No, 'tain't any Sir Willoughby. They're the Markis o' Modbury and Baron Yarner, they told me to tell you, Miss Clare.

JENNY. A Marquis! A Baron!

GANDER. What shall I do wi' 'em, Miss Clare?

CLARE [*walking to GANDER and shaking fist at her in exasperation*]. Madam—Madam—*Madam!* If you forget again I shall send you home to your ducks and your hens!

JENNY. Never mind that now, cousin. [*To GANDER*] Show them in, girl, show them in.

[GANDER *opens double doors and calls off-stage, to L.*

GANDER. You can come in. They're here.

[CLARE *gives her a ferocious look. GANDER runs off to R., leaving doors wide open. The girls hasten to take up positions of negligent ease. CLARE, on her way to R. end of sofa, picks up fan from console table. JENNY sits on chair L.*

Almost immediately the MARQUIS OF MODBURY and BARON YARNER sweep in. They are dandies, dressed in extravagant style with knots of ribbon at the knee, much lace at wrists and throat, while their hats carry eruptions of plumage.

MARQUIS [*mid-stage, on BARON'S R., bowing with immense flourish*]. Ladies!

BARON [*similarly affected*]. Dear ladies!

MARQUIS. I entreat you, do not be surprised at the boldness of our visit. I am under a spell which resists the hammer of reason. [*With a fervid glance at CLARE*] Last night at the play, madam, you were in the first gallery. I was in a box.

CLARE. Were you indeed, sir? I did not notice.

MARQUIS. Cruel, cruel! You cannot have forgotten. You looked over the top of your fan at me—a velvet glance over the edge of that lacy toy. [*CLARE opens her fan and flirts it.*] That glance struck flint—my heart. I was set afire. My friend, Baron Yarnier, madam—

[*The BARON bows low.*

My friend was in a like sad case. But his wound came [*eyeing JENNY*] from another fair assailant.

[*He bows with a flourish to JENNY, and the BARON does likewise. Across their lowered heads the girls exchange looks of triumph at their conquests.*

JENNY. But, Marquis, how did you discover our lodgings?

MARQUIS. When two goddesses come to town the aura of their beauty acts as a beacon. Indeed, madam, it was my servant who discovered this fortunate house.

JENNY. Your London servants seem to be shrewd fellows.

MARQUIS. We can rely upon 'em for every important occasion, marm. [*To CLARE.*] Mine is worth the dozen bottles of wine he steals each year from my cellar.

BARON [*to JENNY*]. And my rascal knows more scandal than one could hear even in my Lady Jibe's closet. I give him bigger bribes than he would get from my enemies, and so keep him loyal.

CLARE [*her native common-sense struggling through*]. Why, my father would not have such a one at home, in the country. Nor hold acquaintance with such friends, neither.

MARQUIS. Ah, virtue is a daisy that grows in meadows, without doubt. But you are now come to London, where there are no meadows, only parks.

JENNY. Are there no daisies in your parks?

MARQUIS. None, madam, none. But why speak of weeds when one has come into a garden where roses and lilies bloom? Why listen to nightingales when the flute of a woman's voice ravishes the senses?

CLARE [*indicating that he should sit on the sofa beside her*]. You are a poet, Marquis.

MARQUIS [*moving and sitting on her left*]. Ah, would it were other than ill-founded rumour, madam!

BARON [*drawing forward the L.C. chair at a smile from JENNY*]. My dear Marquis, your goddess has found you out. You are a poet, as I am a soldier. [*Sits upright, looking as martial as possible.*]

MARQUIS. But, my dear Baron, you are a greater soldier than I am a poet. Ask the King's army. Ask the entire army!

BARON. They would say—ask posterity! Your martial lines rallied the soldiery when the enemy was almost upon them!

JENNY. What, were you *both* gentlemen-at-arms?

MARQUIS. Ladies, in the Baron you behold one of the bravest men of the age. You may not think so, from the delicate pallor of his visage——

BARON [*gently interrupting*]. 'Tis on account of attendance at Court—the King would not be denied—after the healthy fatigues of war.

MARQUIS. Our acquaintance was made in the Army. The first time we saw each other my friend the Baron commanded a regiment of horse, aboard a ship of the line.

BARON [*deprecatingly*]. But for all that, you were before me in the service. When I was but an under-officer you commanded two thousand infantry—on manœuvres.

JENNY. For my part, I've a furious tenderness for men of the sword. Did you see action, Baron?

BARON. Bloody, bloody action, madam. [*Holding out leg*] I was wounded, just under that blue ribbon, by the burst of a grenade, of which I still carry the mark. [*Extending the leg*] Feel a little, I pray.

JENNY [*not very willingly touching the spot*]. There is something of a scar, truly.

BARON [*to CLARE, rising and coming R. of C.*]. And here's a wound which but two days later went quite through me. [*Solemnly beginning to unbutton his coat*] You may feel it.

CLARE [*hastily*]. Thank you, thank you, Baron. I believe you without evidence.

BARON [*bowing, lightly*]. Some other time, perhaps? [*Returning to JENNY*] Would you care to feel it?

JENNY. I thank you, no, sir. Pray sit down and rest yourself.

BARON. You are vastly amiable, madam.

[*Bows and sits, being careful to display the once-wounded leg.*]

CLARE [*to MARQUIS*]. I never before was acquainted with a martial poet, Marquis.

MARQUIS. I have long ceased to be a follower of Mars, madam. I now kneel [*slipping down on one knee*] at the feet of a brighter star—Venus!

JENNY. Is not Venus a planet?

MARQUIS [*still kneeling, but turning towards JENNY with irritation*]. A star, madam, a star.

CLARE [*indignantly*]. A star, cousin. [*Smiling at MARQUIS*] Have you a particular qualification in any special realm of poetry, Marquis?

MARQUIS [*rising from his knee*]. Madrigals, that's my particular qualification, madam. [*Turning and moving L. end of sofa, where he can rest one hand, leaving the other free to gesture. To JENNY*] I'm about to turn the whole of Roman history into madrigals.

JENNY [*impressed*]. La, Marquis!

MARQUIS. I have tossed off twenty quatrains already.

CLARE. How I should like to hear them!

MARQUIS [*quickly*]. Elegant trifles, no more, madam. [*To JENNY*] So the duchess said on Monday when I gave them extempore at her swarry. I have a better, which I made last night [*looking ardently at CLARE*] after my heart had been pierced. [*Turning to BARON*] Yarner, you thought not badly of it.

BARON [*ecstatically*]. Egad, I thought it a masterpiece—an amazing eloquent thing. Do let the ladies have it now, while the bloom is fresh. [*As MARQUIS holds up deprecating hand, continues.*] I pray you, sir! Do not withhold that gem from so fair and eager an audience. [*gesturing towards CLARE and JENNY, who are indeed looking eager by now.*]

[*The MARQUIS, gracefully allowing himself to be persuaded, steps full C., clears his throat, adjusts his ribbons, bows first to CLARE and then to JENNY, and begins to recite.*]

MARQUIS. Your eyes behind the fan peeped out,

At once my poor heart came to grief,

You stole it quite, put me to rout,

And now I cry, stop thief, stop thief!

BARON [*reverently*]. What did I say? Eloquent—eloquent!

CLARE. I do not know how you think of such exquisite sentiments.

MARQUIS. They come to me quite naturally. Without thinking, so to speak. [*Raising a hand delicately to mark the rhythm of his next*]

words] 'Stop—thief—stop—thief.' Yes, I must own to inspiration for that line. [*Dreamily*] 'Stop—thief—stop thief.' I must put that in my next drama.

JENNY. You compose pieces for the playhouse, too? [MARQUIS bows.] To which company shall you entrust your drama?

MARQUIS. Why, to the actors of the Theatre Royal. They alone are capable of doing it justice. As for the rest—pah! Ignorant creatures that speak their parts *au naturel*. They don't understand how to make the verses roar, or where to pause. How can it be known where the fine lines are, if the actor does not stop at them, and apprise you thereby to clap?

BARON. True, true. Your perspicacious actor will know how to stop at 'stop' when you make this into a drama.

MARQUIS. And again at 'stop'—and once more at 'stop' [*turning and bending amorously towards CLARE*] when he looks into the eyes of his goddess.

CLARE [*drawing back a little*]. Indeed, sir . . .

Simultaneously

BARON [*taking his cue for action, rising and quickly closing doors*]. A right handsome quattrain which the Marquis intends should serve for us both. [*Advancing to JENNY*] Your eye steals hearts as easily as do the orbs of t'other pretty wench!

JENNY [*jumping up*]. Sir, I beg of you! [*retreating to window*].

BARON [*following her*]. Nay, 'tis no crime, I warrant, when the malefactor owns to it!

JENNY [*keeping the table between them and dodging*]. I protest I own to nothing!

BARON. And will submit to punishment—ah-ha!

JENNY. I declare there's some mistake!

MARQUIS [*making to embrace CLARE*]. You stole my heart, put me to rout—

CLARE [*retreating R.*]. Nay, sir, I pray you—

MARQUIS [*following her*]. What happens to charming little thieves? The cry goes out—stop thief! Stop thief!

CLARE [*dropping her fan and working up R.*]. I vow you have no cause to think—Sir, have done!

MARQUIS [*pursuing her*]. You stole my heart—

CLARE [*circling sofa*]. Nay, sir, let be!

MARQUIS [*quickenning pace*]. Put me to rout!

CLARE. Nay! Stop, sir!

BARON [*circling table*]. You charming little rogue.

JENNY [*in panic*]. Stay there! Nay—nay!

BARON. Ha—ha—ha! Stop thief!

MARQUIS. What—you ravish my heart, then hold me off?

CLARE [*dodging*]. I did not know—I did not intend—

MARQUIS. Ha—ha—ha! Stop thief!

[*At the height of the confusion the doors are suddenly opened, disclosing NORTON and EARLWOOD, who for a moment watch the scene with amazed faces.*]

EARLWOOD [*coming to MODBURY and seizing him*]. Modbury, you scoundrel! What's this?

CLARE [*clinging to back of sofa*]. Oh! Oh, dear—oh!

NORTON [*making for YARNER*]. Yarnar, you villain! Stop thief indeed! [*Catching him by the collar*] What the deuce are you doing in my best clothes? [*Shaking him*] What are you doing here at all? [*Another shake.*] You villain, this beats everything!

JENNY [*crying out*]. Oh, lord! [*Running across to CLARE*] Clare—Clare—[*clinging to her*] what does it all mean?

EARLWOOD [*gripping MODBURY more tightly*]. And what have you got to say for yourself? I'll teach you to play the fine fellow in my garments! Shall I kill you here or at home, eh?

[*At this, CLARE and JENNY shriek together and collapse on to the sofa.*]

YARNER [*trying to free himself from NORTON's grip*]. 'Twas only a kind of a jest, sir.

NORTON. A jest, forsooth! Earlwood, after you with your sword! [*The girls shriek again and hide their eyes on each other's shoulder.*]

EARLWOOD [*loud with anger*]. You villain—you rogue! [*Frog-marching MODBURY to the door*] Away with you! Begone! [*Shaking him roughly*] You shall pay for this later, you wretch!

[*Throws him out.*]

NORTON [*pushing YARNER in front of him to the door*]. You scoundrel! You dregs! [*Kicking him*] Take that on account of what's coming anon!

[*Thrusts him out with another kick, and closes the door sharply.*]

CLARE [*raising her head*]. Have you—have you dispatched him, sir?

EARLWOOD. I shall deal with the villain at home. I could not have restrained myself here.

NORTON. And I would not answer for what I might have done. The low-bred rogue—the imbecile!

JENNY [*sitting up*]. Who are those persons, sir?

EARLWOOD. Those wretches are our servants, madam.

CLARE [*with a shriek of horror*]. Then they are not a marquis and—and a baron?

NORTON [*laughing contemptuously*]. Marquis! Baron! Lud, no, madam. How you were taken in! [*Turning to EARLWOOD*] D'you hear that, Earlwood? The ladies were kind enough to mistake our villains for gentlemen of quality.

[*Both men laugh, to the girls' discomfiture.*]

JENNY. Are they indeed your servants, sir?

EARLWOOD. They are indeed, madam. Modbury is my man, and Yarnier Mr Norton's.

JENNY [*furiously*]. A monstrous impertinence has been passed on us, cousin.

EARLWOOD. They will pay for it, I assure you, madam. They have on occasion amused us with their play-acting—they consort with rogues of footmen employed by lords and earls. Had I not been so incensed just now I should have admired the imitation.

NORTON. Indeed, it bore a close resemblance to the original.

CLARE [*faintly*]. Are real barons like that, then?

NORTON. Worse. Much worse. The only ones to match 'em are marquises.

JENNY [*stamping her feet and banging her fists on her knees*]. So servants are able to personate them with the greatest ease. Oh! When I think of the villains!

CLARE [*nearing hysterics*]. He said Venus was a star. And I believed him! The wretches, to make such fools of us! [*Pulls out handkerchief*]. I could scream!

JENNY [*handkerchief also out*]. I'm going to scream!

EARLWOOD [*alarmed*]. I pray you, ladies—keep calm.

JENNY [*jumping up*]. Calm! Calm! [*crossing angrily L.*] I'll not keep calm.

NORTON [*following her*]. I implore you, Miss Jenny——

JENNY [*taking up book from table in bay*]. No! No! [*flinging book on floor*] I'm mortified beyond endurance. [*Throws herself into chair.*]

EARLWOOD. Miss Clare, I assure you, they shall be punished for this.

CLARE. I care not for them, sir.

[*Sound of hoofs and carriage drawing up, offstage L.*

JENNY [*thrusting away smelling-salts, which NORTON has taken from table*]. Take it away! I don't want it!

CLARE. This will come to the ears of the village—I know it will——

JENNY. They'll laugh at us—ooooh! [*Drums her feet angrily.*

EARLWOOD. No, no, I assure you. No one will have occasion to laugh.

NORTON [*to JENNY*]. Yes, indeed. We are the only persons who know of it—Earlwood and I—and we shall take care to keep the secret in the family.

[*Enter GANDER in haste. She stops, looking from one pair to the other.*

GANDER. There's a coach at the door, Miss Clare, and two Qualities asking permission to wait on you, Miss Clare. They left tickuts with their names writ on them this morning, so they did. Sir Willoughby—something's one, and t'other——

CLARE [*strongly*]. Tell him to go to the devil.

GANDER. Why, Miss Clare——

JENNY. Tell 'em both to go to the devil.

GANDER. Oo! They're very fine gentlemen, Miss Jenny.

EARLWOOD. Do as your mistresses say, my good girl.

[*NORTON and EARLWOOD turn back to woo the girls to friendliness as GANDER bobs, runs to the door, and almost collides with CRESSWELL re-entering.*

CRESSWELL. There's a coach at the door, girl, full of fops. Are they for here?

GANDER. Oh, no, sir. They're for the devil. Both on 'em.

[*She exits to L.*

CRESSWELL [*looking after her*]. That girl was born with her brains addled. [*Seeing young people, and putting hat and stick on console table R.*] Ah, gentlemen, so you got here. Then it's all settled, I see. Excellent, excellent!

[*Before EARLWOOD and NORTON can speak, music recommences off L.—a gay little tune.*

This calls for celebration, eh?

[*Crossing to table in bay and pouring wine*] I hoped it would be so.
 [*Turning his head and smiling at girls*] And you, my dears—you'll never regret the day you decided to listen to honourable gentlemen.
 [*Continuing to pour wine*] I know 'tis in female nature to be contrary in courting as in everything else. [*Handing glasses to EARLWOOD and NORTON*] But you listened to reason.

[*He returns to table and fills two more glasses, as EARLWOOD and NORTON hand glasses to girls, who receive them non-committally.*

[*Pouring*] Clare, my girl, I'm glad you've given over your frivolous affectations. True love is pure gold. Have done with counterfeit.

[*Crossing with filled glasses to the men, who take them*] And Jenny you minx, you wouldn't have men of heart take you for a vair baggage of frippery and giggles, would you?

[*He gives her a little prod and returns to table to fill his own glass. Doors open, and heads of MODBURY and YARNEY appear. NORTON, hearing door, turns and directs EARLWOOD's attention to faces in doorway. While CRESSWELL is talking the young men edge upstage, signalling desperately to servants to get out. Servants, smiling, hold out their hands for money. EARLWOOD and NORTON quickly take purses from their pockets and hand them. Servants take purses, and then rapidly take wine-glasses, too. EARLWOOD and NORTON swiftly close doors and glide down-stage L.*

[*Holding up glass and moving C.*] Now then, my dears, a toast to you, drunk in this good Canary. [*Looks at it appreciatively, and then speaks directly to the girls.*] I've none of your fine taffeta talk Clare. Mine's plain homespun.

[*While he is speaking, and the girls demurely listening to his homily, NORTON quickly pours fresh wine for himself and EARLWOOD and hands glass to his friend.*

I tell you straight. You may turn the heads of foolish jackanapes with affectation, but you have need of some better art to hold the respect of honest men.

[*EARLWOOD is by CLARE's side now, and NORTON by JENNY. They each extend a hand to their girls, who rise.*

[*Raising his glass*] Daughter—niece—your very good healths!

[*EARLWOOD and NORTON, too, raise their glasses. Music*

swells. As they all drink, doors open, and MODBURY and YARNER again appear, holding up glasses, which are now empty. GANDER comes in the middle. They turn to embrace her, but she ducks, they fall on each other's necks, and GANDER quickly closes the doors.

CRESSWELL, NORTON, and EARLWOOD are drinking the girls' healths, CLARE AND JENNY are curtsying, street music rising to crescendo, as
the CURTAIN falls.

The Black Stirks Light

By William McArthur

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CHARACTERS

ANGUS, *Principal lighthouse-keeper*

BILLY } *Assistant keepers*
NAT }

LIGHTHOUSE SUPERINTENDENT [*off-stage*]

SCENE: *The keepers' living-room in the Black Stirks Lighthouse.*

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

The Black Stirks Light

ANGUS is in his forties, prematurely very grey, tough, dissolute, commanding—and yet faintly uncertain. His dignity and charm of manner are frequently marred by harshness, self-watchfulness, and cynicism. He is, in short, the picture of a conscious failure actual or imminent. His speech is more cultured and less Scots than BILLY'S. He wears well-fitting blue overalls.

BILLY is in his twenties, handsome, agile, and—at the opening—as sleepy as a young animal can be. He wears a blue jersey, blue trousers (navy), and, as indicated, a heavy reefer jacket. In his bearing, from time to time, there are indications of excitability, uneasiness, impatience barely subdued, and distinctly defensive aggressiveness. Towards ANGUS his bearing at first is a compound of respect and uncertainty; towards NAT he is kindly and patronizing. His speech is 'middle' Scots.

NAT is old, but ageless, bald, shrunken, abstracted and excited by turns, self-effacing, deferential, timorous. He wears a suit of faded blue overalls. He has certain senile habits, such as using his cuff as a handkerchief and his dentures as a horse's bit. His movements are stiff. His Scots accent is broad, and his voice wheezy.

SUPERINTENDENT [off-stage] has the Anglified voice of aspiring officialdom.

SCENE: The scene is the living-room in the Black Stirks Lighthouse. The Black Stirks are a group of half-tide rocks thirty miles off the Atlantic coast of Scotland, and approachable only in the most settled weather.

Without being tiny the room must appear almost claustrophobic to the three who spend their off-duty hours in it. Ideally, it will appear circular. It has only one window, a narrow slit in an immensely thick wall at the back. Through this window grey dawn is beginning to shine, emphasized when BILLY extinguishes the lamp (electric) just after the curtain rises.

The furnishings are of the simplest, notably tidy and yet masculine.

There are three wooden chairs and one easy-chair, a Calor gas stove, a table set for a simple breakfast, and—near the stove—a sink and cupboard. Against the wall stands a radio telephone in a prominent position. There is one wall mirror and one picture, a pin-up or film star's enlarged portrait stuck to the wall. It is desirable to have three small lockers or the equivalents, a chronometer of brass, and some books. Below NAT's chair is the only sign of untidiness, a little heap of wood shavings and a roughly whittled model ship.

There is one entry Left and one Right. The action indicates clearly from start to finish that the entrance RIGHT is from BELOW—i.e., from the storerooms, engine-room, and ultimately the rocks. The entrance LEFT is from the Lantern Room ABOVE.

When the curtain rises BILLY is just finishing his breakfast before going on duty. He whistles a popular tune as he tidies up. He takes his own crockery to the sink, washes it perfunctorily, dries it, dabs a little of the same water on his face, towels it vigorously, and combs his hair. He produces more dishes from the cupboard, takes a pot from the stove, and pours out porridge for the other two keepers. Going to the door Left, he calls loudly, clearly, craning sharply up the stairs as he shouts . . .

BILLY. Angus! . . . Nat! . . . Your porridge is dished!

[Murmur of distant reply.]

[BILLY takes his jacket from the back of his chair and pulls it on; he grins at the pin-up girl and turns, suddenly douce, to meet NAT as the latter enters L.]

Mornin', Nat.

NAT. Mornin', Billy, mornin', lad.

BILLY. Had a quiet watch, you and Angus?

[NAT heats his cold, trembling hands over the stove.]

NAT. Aye, a quiet nicht. . . . Twa trawlers working out by. . . . A touch o' fog about three o'clock, but it didna come to anything. We didna start the foghorn. *[NAT sits down at table—stiffly.]* It's perishin' cauld up there, outside. My fingers stuck to the iron o' the rail. *[BILLY helps him to milk.]*

BILLY. This'll put life into you.

NAT. You'd have swore there was thin ice grinding among the rocks in the swell doon there.

[NAT shivers, takes a big, untidy spoonful. BILLY goes to

the door. NAT suddenly rises, dropping his spoon. He detains BILLY.

Bide a wee meenite, Billy!

[NAT resumes his seat and porridge; BILLY makes a gesture of petulance.]

BILLY. What? . . . Ach, still feart to leave me and him alane thegither up at the lantern, eh? Sure we've been on duty thegither for twa years, and naething ever happened.

NAT. Aye—but noodays . . .

BILLY. What?

NAT. Fear gets into an auld man's bones, like the rheumaticks, I expect.

[Laying down his spoon meditatively and uneasily.]
And yet—it tak's something in the air to start up the yin or the ither.

BILLY. I'm no' feart o' Angus.

NAT. No, no!

BILLY. Up them dizzy stairs—or anywhere!

NAT. A lighthouse like this is no place for him and you to be thegither.

BILLY *[going to the door L.]*. How no?

NAT. Laddie, laddie, it's ninety feet sheer *[pointing up, then down]* from the platform roon the light to the Black Stirks below us. That sort o' height puts ideas into a man's heid . . . even if his conscience is clear.

BILLY. Well, Nat, your old conscience is clear enough, anyhow.

NAT *[rising and going across to hold BILLY at the door]*. No . . . No' after what you telt me, laddie. Some secrets mak' even the hearers sort o' guilty. I . . . I like you baith. It's me is sorry. If anything happens my conscience canna be clear—after what you telt me.

BILLY *[with tolerant contempt]*. Eat up! Your porridge is getting a leathery skin, man.

[BILLY puts ANGUS's plate back on the stove.]

What the devil's keeping Angus?

NAT. The log—maybe. Listen, Billy!

BILLY *[impatiently]*. I'm listening.

NAT. Dinna provoke him—no' here!

BILLY. Fair warning, eh?

NAT. Saft answers, lad!

BILLY. Aye, aye.

NAT. Young cockerels aye strut in the pride o' possession.

BILLY. And auld men bleat about things they've forgot the feel o'!

NAT. Could you no' gie her up—a'thegither? [Pause.
Could you no'?

BILLY. I've tried. . . . Ach, you winna understand.

NAT [kindly]. No? . . . I ken her kind. No' new. She's in the Bible.
She's in the newest film.

BILLY. Do you think . . . he kens? . . . Do you?

NAT. He's sair tormented. . . . Ask yoursel'!

BILLY. Does he ever ask about me and . . . Elsie?

NAT [weakly and evasively]. No' . . . exactly.

BILLY. He's feart to ask.

NAT. Aye, maybe for pride. After a', he was yince a ship's captain
. . . and then he has a Hielanman's pride forby. Nae bottom to that
. . . and aye the less cause he has for pride, the mair pride he'll
feel.

BILLY. If he asked . . . would you tell him about . . . Elsie and me?

NAT. What? Hae him at your throat—and mine? She's a' he has
noo—or thinks he has. Why the hell did you have to tell me
about—everything?

BILLY. God knows. . . . Had to tell somebody.

[NAT nods and sits down disconsolately; he looks up at
BILLY wide-eyed.

NAT. When Angus faces the truth . . . what'll come of us a'?

[Enter ANGUS L.

BILLY. Morning, Angus.

ANGUS. Morning.

[BILLY places ANGUS' porridge on the table, exchanges a
quizzical look with NAT surreptitiously, shrugs his
shoulders and goes out L. ANGUS hangs his jacket on
the back of his chair, warms his hands momentarily at
the stove, and sits opposite NAT, who is apparently
absorbed in eating his porridge.

NAT. Cauld porridge.

ANGUS. Um.

[ANGUS eats stolidly.

NAT. Milk that's made up wi' watter. The lighthouse service isna
everybody's idea o' hame comforts.

ANGUS. Never mind; this is your last day at it, Nat.

NAT. I never believed my retirement date would ever come . . . like the way wi' death itsel'.

ANGUS. We'll miss you here, next spell o' duty.

NAT. My eyesight and everything's no' that bad. Do you no' think the Superintendent might let me hang on for a wee, eh?

ANGUS. Everybody has to retire some time, except Cabinet Ministers.

NAT. I'll weary ashore.

ANGUS. We'll come up to the croft and visit you, every time we're on leave.

NAT. Aye, aye . . . just the way folk tak' wreaths to the kirk-yard for the first anniversary or twa.

ANGUS. You're no' just the cheeriest company, Nat.

NAT. Ach, I was just tryin' to keep you frae thinkin' o'er much.

ANGUS. Um . . . Thanks.

NAT. If a man gets peace . . . he just starts to think about things.

ANGUS [*rising uneasily and going to the window, he speaks bitterly*]. Peace to think . . . to sit in this trap, like a rat, gnawing my ain guts.

[ANGUS taps barometer.

NAT. Sea's going down.

ANGUS [*matter-of-fact again*]. Aye. We should a' get ashore the morn. . . . Hame.

NAT. A nice change frae this.

[*Pouring some watery milk into his plate.*

ANGUS. Umphumph. . . . A change from watching a muckle light go round and round . . . to watching . . . what I watch ashore.

[*He gazes out the window, and NAT half rises in trepidation.*

Never mind. Sit down! [*Forced casualness.*] We'll a' get off the Black Stirks the morn.

[*NAT gets up and stares out.*

NAT. Aye, aye. Yon's just a guid-weather mist hangin' across the mainland, like an auld feather boa.

ANGUS [*catching sight of the pin-up*]. Aye . . . or a nylon faldelal that doesna hide as much as it shows.

[*They resume their places at table, ANGUS putting a friendly hand on NAT'S shoulder as they sit.*

NAT. I'll be sorry to go ashore for good . . . but a wee bit relieved as well.

ANGUS. Um?

NAT. It's aye been a weird place at the best, the Black Stirks Light.

ANGUS. Ach, queer stories gather round any ocean light.

NAT. There was yon poor lad that disappeared . . . out there.

[*Pointing vaguely to the window.*]

ANGUS. Fishing . . . washed off the rocks . . . likely.

NAT. Never a sign o' him again.

ANGUS. The Atlantic's pretty wide.

NAT. It is that—And the chart says it's a hunner and seventeen fathom out there . . . no muckle further than you could skliff a clam-shell on a calm day. . . . Angus, it's nae wonder some folk declare the Black Stirks is haunted.

ANGUS. Bloody nonsense! Another biscuit?

NAT. Feenished . . . You ken, Angus, it's a real comfort to have you here—you no' believin' in superstition and sic things.

ANGUS [*bringing teapot from stove and pouring out tea despite NAT's dissenting gesture*]. Take another cup! Up there [*pointing*], about three in the morning, I could believe nearly anything—especially, ha, ha! wi' you craiking in my lug! [*Softer*] No offence, Nat. You mean well.

NAT. I understand.

ANGUS [*suspiciously*]. Just what . . . do you understand?

NAT. I was just speakin' generally.

ANGUS. Um. We're too close together here for 'speaking generally.' [*Subdued passion*] Close? At times I feel we're that close I'm living right inside your old greasy semmit. What could you be thinking about 'generally'?

NAT. Och, just human nature . . . generally.

ANGUS [*disbelieving*]. Um. That a'? . . . A queer life this . . .

NAT. No' a'thegither natural, maybe.

ANGUS. Living most o' the time in a monastery here—and the rest o' the time in a pub.

NAT. It's great the way you can keep yoursel' off the stuff the weeks you're here, Angus.

ANGUS. Daren't touch one drop—here.

[*ANGUS rises and begins to take the dishes to the sink.*]

[*Watching him askance, NAT takes up his carving.*]

NAT. You should have feenished your porridge.

ANGUS. Cold and lumpy.

NAT. Aye . . . Billy's no' the cook he was even.

[ANGUS stops washing the dishes and comes slowly behind

NAT, who is acutely aware of him but does not look up until ANGUS speaks.

ANGUS. Nat. . . .

NAT. Aye?

ANGUS. There's something . . . something I've got to ask you.

NAT [*shrinking*]. There's things that's better no' asked—or even thocht about.

ANGUS. There's something I must ken. Must [*wildly*].

[*He seizes NAT by the shoulders as NAT rises and swings him round till they are face to face.*]

NAT. Dinna, Angus! . . . Angus, dinna! Listen!

[*NAT points to the radio set, and both listen.*]

A call for us.

[*ANGUS walks slowly to the set and adjusts it.*]

SUPERINTENDENT on Radio. Superintendent calling the Black Stirks Light. Superintendent calling. Are you getting me, Black Stirks? Over!

ANGUS [*pause*]. Black Stirks Light. Over.

SUPERINTENDENT. Right, Angus. Awfully sorry, but I've had a bit of bother about your relief keepers—illness and what-not. Afraid we'll not manage to take you off to-morrow yourself. Might as well take Billy, but you'll have to stay on for a bit.

[*The knife falls with a clatter from NAT's hand.*]

Keep Nat with you. Mind you, I may manage to rearrange things yet, but if you don't hear from me later to-day, just take it that you and Nat are staying on meantime, and Billy's coming ashore to-morrow. O.K.? Over to you.

ANGUS [*very slowly, as in a daze*]. Message received. Over.

SUPERINTENDENT. Nothing from your end? Over.

ANGUS. Nothing.

SUPERINTENDENT. Any message for—anybody ashore? Over.

ANGUS. No message.

SUPERINTENDENT. All right. May call you later. Signing off.

[*ANGUS wanders slowly from the seat to the window. NAT approaches him uneasily.*]

NAT. He said we . . . ?

ANGUS [*bitter mimicry of SUPERINTENDENT's Anglified diction*]. 'you and Nat are staying on meantime . . . Billy's coming ashore.'

[ANGUS wanders round the room—animal-in-cage manner.

NAT watches anxiously.

NAT. Better turn in and sleep a wee, Angus. [*Softly*] You're no' just yoursel' these days.

ANGUS. Um?

NAT. Try a sleep. You hardly slept yesterday. Grand thing, a sleep—for anything.

[NAT takes ANGUS by the elbow and leads him, unresisting, towards the door R. Suddenly ANGUS turns back into the room.

ANGUS. No! It's when I try to sleep . . . things come over me. You're tired; turn in yoursel'.

NAT. Oh, no!

ANGUS. Why? Why not?

NAT [*weakly*]. Och, I dinna need so muckle sleep nooadays.

[ANGUS strides towards the cupboard.

No' that! No' that—here!

[ANGUS produces a bottle of whisky from cupboard.

For God's sake, put it awa'! [ANGUS replaces the bottle slowly.

ANGUS. You're right . . . not here.

[ANGUS comes towards NAT at the table; NAT shrinks.

You heard him, eh? [*pointing to radio.*]

NAT. Aye, aye. I'll bide wi' you.

ANGUS. We stay. . . . He goes ashore . . . alone.

[ANGUS turns from NAT, paces to and fro, then, stopping to peer at the distant land, he mutters half to himself.

A harried nest!

[Enter BILLY L.

BILLY. Did I hear the wireless? Superintendent, eh?

NAT. Aye.

BILLY. Anything special?

NAT. Well, no' much.

ANGUS [*coming towards BILLY, to NAT's alarm*]. You've to go ashore the morn . . . by yourself.

BILLY. By masel'?

ANGUS. The boat will take you off the Stirks the morn.

BILLY. But . . . what about you and . . . ?

ANGUS [*subdued but wildly*]. I'm to stay on here with this [*pointing to NAT*] . . . and that! [*pointing to bottle.*]

BILLY. You're under the weather a bit. Ring up the Super and tell him I'll bide here instead of you.

ANGUS. You'll go. Orders. A job's a job. Mine's here.

BILLY. But I——

ANGUS. You'll no' patronize me.

BILLY [*placatory*]. All right, all right—but I could take your place for a wee while, surely.

ANGUS [*with dry intensity*]. Aye.

[*As ANGUS approaches BILLY, with fixed glare, NAT intervenes.*]

NAT. Angus, Angus, dinna provoke a laddie! He's young.

ANGUS [*pushing NAT gently aside*]. And willing, eh?

[*ANGUS comes close to BILLY, who flushes and with momentary uncertainty faces him aggressively. NAT vainly tries to get between them; ANGUS tosses him aside.*]

ANGUS speaks much more quietly, but with an impression of mounting strain.

Keep out my road, you doddering old bastard! You [*to BILLY*] . . . get back to your post . . . on watch. I'm in command here . . . still.

BILLY. O.K.

NAT [*hustling BILLY towards the door L.*]. Awa' wi' you, laddie, quick, quick!

[*BILLY goes out the door L. obviously angry and confused. Suddenly he springs back into the room, his look and gestures challenging. At NAT's mute gesture of horror and terror, however, he slowly turns on his heel and walks out quickly, banging the door behind him. ANGUS does not show any sign of having noticed his re-entry.*]

ANGUS [*his breathing audible*]. Sit down, Nat! Sit.

[*NAT sits down, visibly relieved and puzzled. ANGUS stands over him, one hand on NAT's shoulder.*]

You ken what the Superintendent's message means . . . for us?

NAT. We bide here . . . you and me . . . a day or twa.

ANGUS. Nor that.

NAT. No?

ANGUS. You ken what the message really means.

NAT. Eh? What?

ANGUS. *He goes ashore . . . alone . . . to her. That's what! . . .*

[*He grips NAT by both shoulders and hauls him out his chair to his feet, peering closely into the old man's face.*

You ken what's between the pair of them . . . you think. The village thinks I canna mind my ain.

NAT [*struggling feebly in his grip*]. Maybe . . . maybe it's no' true.

ANGUS. They never cheated me . . . yet! . . . The bitch! [*Slowly releasing NAT, who sinks into his chair*] Sae bonnie, Nat, sae bonnie. . . even her ain man notices still . . . ha, ha!

[*Intemperate, unbalanced laughter.*

NAT. For God's sake, dinna laugh like that—no' here!

ANGUS [*fiercely*]. Nae man is going to take my place!

NAT. No, no! . . . Of course, Angus, there's things in this world that just sort of happen . . . Nae help, nae preventin'.

ANGUS [*turning on him*]. You think they could cheat me, even wi' me ashore?

NAT. No, no. No' that exactly.

ANGUS. Exactly what?

NAT. Ach, well, there's women will be lying wi' their lovers, aye, even in their ain men's airms.

[*ANGUS takes a few paces about the room, then turns sharply to the photo, pointing.*

ANGUS. Her! Her to the life. . . . The bitch! But . . . she never got the chance . . . till now. . . . He's going ashore. . . . No, I'll bide. Let village gossips slobber as they like; I'll bide. My post. Here.

[*ANGUS gazes out the window, silently, then adds softly, but to the uttermost horror of NAT.*

He'll go . . . or will he?

NAT [*affecting incomprehension*]. He'll stay, of course. You go. Easy, Angus [*hand on heart*] . . . you kind o' frichtit me.

[*NAT stands shivering.*

ANGUS [*suddenly calm and resolved*]. Sorry.

[*ANGUS fetches the whisky from the cupboard and pours out a cup for NAT.*

NAT. Angus, I'm too auld for this sort o' wild talk. You're my best freens, baith o' you.

ANGUS. Drink this!

[*NAT sips his whisky and ANGUS replaces the bottle in the*

cupboard, hesitantly. NAT cranes round to see ANGUS gazing moodily out at the brightening sky.

NAT. There's the sun up at last. A braw sharp day. . . . There's no' a sicht on earth to beat the sun comin' up across Mull, there . . . like the Lord takin' o'er duty again frae the deil.

[ANGUS catches sight of the photo again, and his brief lassitude gives place to tense excitement.]

ANGUS. That photo!

NAT. What about it?

ANGUS *[striding close to NAT and pointing to the photo]*. Who is she?

NAT. Ach, some film star.

ANGUS. And what does it hang there for?

NAT. The laddie maun weary whiles, out here. I expect he just likes to dream o' ticklin' her.

ANGUS. Shut up—and look! The resemblance. See it?

[ANGUS snatches the pin-up from the wall and thrusts it in NAT's face.]

Who . . . is . . . that?

NAT *[retrieving his fallen knife with a scrabbling movement and, holding it up in futile defence]*. I dinna ken. . . . Wha?

ANGUS. Hanging there, day and night, smirking at me! I'll tell you who she is!

[He smooths the picture fiercely on the table.]

That's Elsie! Elsie, my wife! Look at it!

[He grips NAT by the back of the neck and thrusts his face down towards the picture. The knife falls.]

NAT. Aye, a wee bit like . . . maybe . . . in some ways . . . but a' bonnie lassies look the same nooadays.

ANGUS *[releasing NAT, and lapsed into black introspection]*. Too bonnie altogether.

[Awkwardly, and vainly, ANGUS tries to restore the picture to its place on the wall. It flutters to the floor. Both gaze down on it in silence. ANGUS stoops to pick it up, changes his mind, visibly tries to take command of himself, and sits down opposite NAT, taking the old man's wrists in his hand.]

Sorry, Nat. . . . Forgot myself. . . . We must try to be sensible . . . about everything.

NAT. That's right, Angus.

ANGUS. Sensible. . . Here, drink up!

[He helps NAT to drink his whisky; the cup rattles against the old man's teeth.]

NAT *[nervously]*. Hee, hee! Never had the same taste for whisky since I got them false teeth.

ANGUS. Sensible, sensible. . . Got to settle this . . . me and him . . . about her.

NAT. Billy used to be like a son to you here.

ANGUS. Shut up! *[Rising]* My God . . . I must ask. . . What . . . what is it they say ashore about Billy and *[pointing to photo]* her?

NAT. Ach, you ken what womenfolk are—in wee places.

ANGUS *[leaning farther and farther across the table towards NAT]*. Out with it! I'll stand it! Anything!

[He takes NAT again by the wrists.]

NAT *[groan]*. Oh! Let go!

ANGUS *[soft, slow, insane]*. Did they cheat me . . . when I was drunk, eh? Eh? Eh?

NAT *[cowering]*. How could I ken? . . . I'm feart . . . I canna think richt. . . It's lies, likely. . . I'm an auld man, Angus, you'll throttle me. Help!

[The table and the remaining dishes fall with a crash between the struggling men. NAT rises to his feet and totters to the door L.; he shouts feebly.]

Billy! Billy! . . . No! Dinna come doon. Oh, dinna!

[NAT sobs audibly. ANGUS stands above the fallen table, head in hands. Noticing the photograph, he grinds it fiercely underfoot.]

[Enter BILLY L.]

Keep awa'! . . . Back, up to the light!

[NAT vainly tries to push BILLY out. BILLY surveys the room and puts an arm protectively across NAT'S shoulder.]

BILLY. What's a' this?

NAT. Dinna touch him, Angus! . . . Angus, nae fechtin' here!

[BILLY looks at the trampled photo, surprised and amused rather than indignant.]

ANGUS *[approaching despite NAT'S appeal]*. Your girl friend, eh?

[ANGUS thrusts NAT testily from him towards the door R.]
Down the stairs with you—quick!

NAT. What for?

ANGUS. The Diesels—anything.

NAT. Billy's job.

ANGUS. Check the fuel. . . . Get out!

[NAT backs towards the door R.

[Exit NAT.

BILLY. What's bitin' you? Drunk?

[Challenge in voice.

ANGUS. Worse than that—sober!

[BILLY lifts the table and one or two pieces of crockery.

You hear? Not drunk!

BILLY. No' whisky, anyhow.

ANGUS. No, nor your itch to get ashore either.

BILLY. I tell you, I'd stay here, if you——

ANGUS. You'll tell me nothing. . . . You'll go ashore the morn.

[Softer.] Looking forward, eh?

BILLY [uneasy casualness]. Why not? Long walks . . . green grass . . . football . . . room to breathe.

ANGUS. Fine to be young. . . . Nothing else?

BILLY. You look forward to shore leave as much as anybody.

ANGUS. What for? Say it!

BILLY. A' right, then . . . for the sake of the pub.

ANGUS [bitterly]. Ha, ha . . . you've a worse thirst than me.

BILLY. Right enough, Angus, I admire your guts . . . the way you keep off the bottle whiles you're here. I'm sorry if——

[NAT enters R., timidly and unobtrusively.

ANGUS. You sorry? By God, that's the only thing I couldna' put up with.

NAT. Wheesht, wheesht!

ANGUS [rounding on NAT]. Get down that stair again . . . down to hell if you like!

NAT. Now, boys, boys . . .

[Exit NAT R.

ANGUS [to BILLY, with a supreme effort at self-control]. Sit! . . . Sit down! . . . We've got to be . . . sensible . . . about everything . . . you and me . . . sensible, or else . . .

[They sit down slowly at table opposite each other, BILLY obviously suspicious and excited, ANGUS at first vaguely abstracted. ANGUS rises and fetches the bottle to the table with a mute invitation. BILLY refuses to drink. ANGUS lays the bottle down, unconsciously fondling it.

I've lost a lot of things . . . one way and another . . . No—just the

one way—whisky . . . my ship, my master's ticket. . . I've come down a bit.

BILLY. Takes a man to thole the like o' that.

ANGUS [*sudden blaze of rage*]. My God, I've spent the night listening to an old man's blethers—and now a testimonial from a haufin! [*Sulkily subdued*] No. I don't mean that. That was the whisky speaking—or [*slightly hysterical*] ha, ha! maybe the want of it. Aye, near leave time I . . . I'll get leave in time—what does it matter, anyhow, eh?

BILLY. Surely you want your leave?

ANGUS. Um. You ken how I'll spend it. . . Drunk while my money lasts . . . happy . . . twenty-four unconscious hours, every bloody day . . . while you . . . eh? You?

[*They jump to their feet and face each other tensely across the table.*]

BILLY [*placatory*]. But . . . but . . . could you no' . . . for Elsie's sake maybe—

ANGUS. Elsie? My God! To my very face! What the hell has she to do with you, eh? [*He comes round the table towards BILLY.*]

BILLY. Well, I was at school wi' Elsie, and . . .

ANGUS. Aye. Young thegither! . . . And like enough you kissed her out o' school, eh? [*Approaching BILLY fiercely*] Maybe you couldn't forget the taste o't, you young bastard!

BILLY [*facing up to him*]. You'll no' fright me wi' noise like Nat!

ANGUS [*picking up NAT's fallen knife*]. I'll have the truth about you and Elsie—now!

BILLY. Steady up! You're demented, man!

ANGUS. The truth, my braw schoolboy!

[*ANGUS slowly pursues BILLY round the table and chairs, knife in hand, point upward; BILLY cautiously keeps furniture between them.*]

Young! . . . Spry! . . . slippery as a conger eel—and just as slimy. . . No' feart, eh?

BILLY [*lifting a chair*]. No! No' for you! Come on!

ANGUS. Ah, but you never saw a knife used . . . like this!

[*Savage upward gesture.*]

I've seen young thieves like you dealt with abroad. I ken a foreign cure for slippery young thieves.

BILLY. What the hell's on your mind . . . besides whisky?

ANGUS. Elsie! I'm telling you, I'll have the truth o't out of you, even if it's wi' this blunt gully! A bloody thief!

BILLY. You didna deserve her!

ANGUS. Ho, ho! The better man, you, eh? When I was lying in a ditch or a pub lavatory, where were you lying then, eh? [*Closer approach*] Where?

BILLY. Where I wouldna see or smell you!

ANGUS. Wi' her! Close and warm!

[ANGUS rushes at BILLY, who wards him off with a chair.

BILLY then drops the chair, and they grapple for the knife. The uproar brings NAT in at the door R. His cry of alarm checks them momentarily and allows NAT to snatch his knife, which ANGUS surrenders contemptuously.

Only the one of us can go home.

BILLY. Want a witness?

[*Pointing to NAT.*

ANGUS. No. . . . Would you like a mourner?

BILLY [*panting with effort, fear, and excitement*]. Bare hands . . . fair fight . . . anywhere.

ANGUS. Anywhere, eh? [*Nodding upward*] We'll not need muckle room to settle things. The platform round the light, narrow but . . .

NAT [*vainly trying to keep BILLY from going towards the door L.*]. No' there! Oh, no' there! Nae fechtin'! A' freens here . . . the only freens I hae . . . Angus, he's just a laddie yet. He didna ken what he was daein'!

ANGUS. He'll only need one lesson.

[*Pointing upward.*

[ANGUS pushes NAT savagely aside. NAT falls heavily, partly stunned.

Interfering old . . . [*to BILLY*] I'll lock him in here. . . . We need peace to settle . . . our affairs.

[NAT vainly tries to rise before they leave. BILLY goes out L., watchful of ANGUS, who is following closely. There is the sound of a key turning in the lock, as NAT rises with difficulty. NAT totters to the door L. and vainly tries to open it. He listens tensely. Then he goes to the window and cranes as far out as possible to look fearfully upward. Sobbing with anxiety and fear, he watches the unseen struggle on the platform above him. The course of the fight must be suggested by his expression and

slight movements. Suddenly there is a long-drawn scream; the bright sunlight beyond the window is momentarily obscured, as NAT falls back into the room in abject horror. With a shudder of hesitancy he forces himself to go back to the window and look down. He comes away, weeping. Suddenly he is all ears. In panic he drags some furniture to the door L. and piles it up as a crazy barricade, his lips moving in agony or prayer. Pausing in this task, NAT listens for a second and then hurries out the door R., which he closes and locks after him.

[The door L. is shaken furiously. With a heave and muttered curse ANGUS topples down the barricade, and forces his way into the room. He gazes uncomprehendingly at the furniture and the empty room. He is distracted and dishevelled, his shirt torn at both sleeves; there is blood on his face. He gazes fixedly at the familiar room, and picks up one or two fallen objects, inspecting them closely as though to get his bearings on reality. Seemingly he fails. He sits at the table holding the whisky bottle and staring at the open door L. He uncorks the bottle and lifts it to his lips. In the act of drinking he catches sight of the photograph on the floor; his head sinks on his arms and he is shaken with silent sobs. NAT enters slowly R. and comes behind ANGUS. ANGUS gazes at him for a time, then suddenly leaps up and seizes NAT by the shoulders.

ANGUS. You saw . . . yon? [*Pointing to the window*] You saw him, eh?

NAT. The tide's ta'en him awa' already. I've been doon. High water.

ANGUS. Dead.

NAT. Deid for sure. Another mystery for the Black Stirks. Lost.

ANGUS. No.

NAT. What?

ANGUS. No mystery. You'll tell what——

NAT. No, no! No' me! Not a word! What's done's done. A heavy penalty for a' he got frae her. Paid . . . in full. Clear o'er the railin's . . . ninety feet to the rocks below the watter.

ANGUS. Shut up!

NAT. I'll never breathe it to a soul, no' me!

ANGUS. You'll talk . . . in your cups . . . in your sleep . . . in your dotage . . . poor old man. [ANGUS takes NAT by the throat.

NAT. I'll swear by anything, Angus!

ANGUS. No use.

NAT. Angus, Angus! You're no' yoursel' . . . Angus, you couldna take the last years awa' frae an auld freen! Think, Angus!

ANGUS. No other way can keep it secret about him and her . . . and yon.

NAT. Angus, I swear I'll cairry the secret to my grave.

ANGUS. Your grave will have to be the Atlantic, out there with Billy. [He bends NAT backward, and then lets him fall.

I canna do it. . . . My blood's cold.

NAT [mumbling]. Our Father which art . . .

[ANGUS sees the photo on the table and stabs it with the bread-knife, which remains quivering in the table.

ANGUS turns away towards the window, as NAT rises from his knees.

NAT. They'll take us hame the morn, Angus . . . and everything will be all right . . . in the end. When we're hame we'll . . .

ANGUS. Home, eh? To what?

NAT. She'll never hear a word frae me.

ANGUS [gesture with hands]. When I get yon white throat between my fingers . . . No. I'll not go . . . Better . . .

NAT. You'll be all right when you——

ANGUS [turning to NAT]. It was *her* killed him . . . the silly laddie.

NAT. Now, now . . .

ANGUS. Nat . . . you're sure he's dead?

NAT. Deid . . . drooned . . . awa'.

[ANGUS sobs.

Would killing her do him any good?

ANGUS. I couldna kill . . . a face like that . . . and, yet, something would make me.

NAT. Easy and quiet, lad! Try to forget a wee.

ANGUS. If you'd seen his eyes when I bent him o'er the rail, Nat . . . I'd have to kill her.

NAT. Angus, you better call the Superintendent right away to get us off.

ANGUS. No. The Black Stirks Light is in your charge till the morn; your first command. I'm not coming ashore.

[*With a last look at the photo, ANGUS turns to the door R.*
I'd better not see her again. . . . Let the Black Stirks settle . . . everything. . . . Bide . . . bide you here!

[ANGUS goes out the door R. He locks it behind him, and
NAT tries to open it in vain. NAT then goes to the
window, cranes out, looks down and shouts.

NAT. No, no, Angus! Angus, come back! Back!

[*Bewildered, NAT staggers from the window.*
No' a struggle . . . hardly a ripple . . . gie tired.

SUPERINTENDENT (on radio). Black Stirks Light . . . Black Stirks Light . . . Superintendent calling from base. Over!

[NAT looks dazedly at set, then hurries over to it.

NAT. Black Stirks Light . . . Nat speakin'.

SUPERINTENDENT. Nat? Never mind. Just tell Angus it's all right about your reliefs. Tell him we'll take all three of you off the Black Stirks to-morrow. Over.

NAT. The day! No' the morn! You maun tak' me out o' this the day! I'll never see the morn, if I bide on the Stirks alane wi' . . . wi' a' that's here. I canna bear it, honest, I canna. Over.

SUPERINTENDENT. I think I understand, but I don't want any official complaint that Angus has . . . forgotten himself. Would spoil his clean record. You'll manage as understudies. See everything's spick and span on the Black Stirks to-morrow when the boat comes. Have Angus sober! No more grouching! Signing off!

NAT. No, no! Wait! I'll be demented by the morn. . . . There's things in this place worse than having' only my ain sel' for company. Haunted! Haunted for sure! Tak' me aff! . . . Tak' me hame! For God's sake tak' me hame!

[*The radio is 'dead'; the curtain falls.*

The Laboratory

By David Campton

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CHARACTERS
(in order of appearance)

GABRIOTTO, *an apothecary (aged 50)*

EMILIA, *his servant (aged 40)*

ALBERTO DA BRESCIA, *a court official (aged 35)*

VIOLANTE DEL PONTE NERO, *his mistress (aged 19)*

GIANNETTA DA BRESCIA, *his wife (aged 40)*

SCENE: *The apothecary's laboratory, in one of the smaller Italian City States.*

YEAR: *About 1560.*

TIME: *Morning.*

This play won first prize in the One-Act Playwriting Competition, held by the Tavistock Repertory Company of London, in 1954.

Applications regarding acting rights of this play should be addressed to Messrs J. Garnet Miller, Ltd, 54 Victoria Street, London, S.W.1

The Laboratory

SCENE: *The apothecary's cellar is a dismal, smoke-grimed place. Steps up-stage left lead to ground-level and daylight. When the door is opened a shaft of light shines down the steps. A furnace, glowing in the centre of the right wall, throws a fantastic light over the room. On the fire pots bubble and simmer. In the centre of the room, in front of the fire, stands a bench laden with bottles and jars and a crude distilling apparatus. Left end and in front of the bench is a smallish square stool. In an alcove down left is a table with a reading-desk, books, candelabra, and some such piece of mumbo-jumbo as a stuffed owl or a skull. At right of the table is a large square stool.*

When the curtain rises the apothecary is writing at his desk in the alcove. GABRIOTTO is an emaciated man in middle life. His eyes have the far-away look of the earnest research worker, and he is completely humourless. The cellar door is shut, and the only light in the room comes from the fire, and from the candles by GABRIOTTO'S elbow.

GABRIOTTO [*laying down his pen, and reading what he has written*]. 'Little considered are the healing properties of coloured water, and faith in the physician. The flavour should be bitter, and the action mildly purging. Distilled pods of senna, or liquorice root may be administered in small doses.' Hm. What a waste of time while the universe waits to be explored. [*He pats the 'familiar' affectionately.*] But we must earn a living, somehow. [*He gets up, and crosses over to the fire.*] Ah, well. Is the angelica and rhubarb drying? What are these? [*He bends down, and looks under the furnace.*] Patties! That woman has been roasting pies in my furnace again. [*He calls up the cellar steps.*] Emilia! Emilia! [*Grumbling, he goes back to his fire.*] Ducats I spend on fuel, and she turns the heat from my retorts to her baking pans. [*He pulls out a pie, and drops it on to the bench.*] Ouch! That's hot. [*Blowing on his fingers, he stamps to the steps again.*]

Woman! If this happens once more I'll pack her away. I'll save the expense of her wages, and cook for myself. Woman, remove these pannikins! [*The door at the top of the stairs is opened.*]

EMILIA [*shouting down*]. What are you raving about?

GABRIOTTO. Come down here, and look at these.

EMILIA [*coming down, grumbling*]. What mischief are you brewing now? [*She sees the pastry, and makes for it.*] What have you done to those pies?

GABRIOTTO. Remove them, I tell you!

EMILIA. And half cooked, too. The pastry will be ruined. [*She returns the pie to its place under the furnace.*] Some men have less brains in their heads than the folderols on their desks.

GABRIOTTO. That heat is reserved for my distillations; I will not have it dissipated for the kitchen table.

EMILIA. And what am I to cook by—the sun?

GABRIOTTO. It is dangerous. Yesterday you changed my crock of hemlock for your saucepan of cabbage. You might have destroyed us both.

EMILIA. Those that live by poison had better beware of poison. If your black potions get in the way of my good food, you'd better find another place for 'em. What's bubbling there?

[*She looks into a pot.*]

GABRIOTTO [*upset*]. Death, if you drink it.

EMILIA. It looks like cabbage to me.

GABRIOTTO [*pleading*]. You confuse me. My experiments are useless if I use the wrong ingredients. You'll be the ruin of me.

[*A bell rings.*]

EMILIA. Then you could turn to a safe trade like an honest citizen instead of selling grave-dust to poor innocents.

GABRIOTTO [*with an imperious wave of the hand*]. Enough, woman. Some one is at the door: answer it.

EMILIA [*crossing and mounting two steps*]. I've seen you at work pounding up your toads and spiders. I've heard you talking in Algebra to that heathen on your table, cursing in Greek. [*Pausing and turning*] And sickly creatures come to you for cures.

[*The bell rings again.*]

GABRIOTTO. The bell is ringing.

EMILIA. You trade in wickedness.

[*The bell rings.*]

GABRIOTTO [*patiently*]. Will you answer the door?

EMILIA. Another wretch tolling his own knell.

GABRIOTTO. The door.

EMILIA [*a parting shot*]. Monster!

[*She goes off. GABRIOTTO heaves a sigh, wanders over to his desk, and sits down.*]

GABRIOTTO. The indignity of it: Algebra, poison, and Greek! And the smell of these pies takes my mind from Science, and fixes it on food.

EMILIA [*reappearing and shouting from top of steps*]. A man to see you.

GABRIOTTO. Then show him down.

EMILIA. Straight down the steps, and don't break your neck.

DA BRESCIA [*appearing; smoothly*]. Thanks, woman. [*Giving coin*]
For your pains.

EMILIA [*more gently*]. Thank you, signore.

DA BRESCIA [*giving another coin*]. And there.

[*He crosses her and comes slowly down stairs.*]

EMILIA [*overcome*]. Oh, thank you, my lord. Take particular care on the stairs. The last few are worn.

[*ALBERTO DA BRESCIA is a dark man in the prime of life with a Mephistophelian look about him, cruel and sensual. He stands on the bottom step for a second or two, looking into the gloom at the apparatus.*]

DA BRESCIA. Where is the master of these mysteries?

GABRIOTTO [*standing up*]. Signore?

DA BRESCIA. Gabriotto of Pisa?

GABRIOTTO [*with a slight bow*]. Your servant, my lord.

DA BRESCIA [*moving over to him*]. Spare the titles, man. I have further to climb before they fit. So you are the apothecary.

GABRIOTTO [*motioning him to the stool by the desk*]. Will you sit here? The light is not good, but smuts fly in the air nearer to the fire.

DA BRESCIA [*sitting*]. The darkness suits your trade.

GABRIOTTO. It has its secrets like any other.

DA BRESCIA. More than most, I imagine. These walks stink of brimstone. How often do you sup with the Devil?

GABRIOTTO [*stiffly*]. I am a man of science, not a quack. If your excellency will describe your ailments I shall do my best to provide a cure.

DA BRESCIA. My ailments? Ah, yes. I have a queasiness of the mind, buzzing around my inner ear.

GABRIOTTO. A disturbance of the sleep, too?

DA BRESCIA. Exactly.

GABRIOTTO. Cold sweats, and dreams? Terrors that lurk in the night and hang over into the morning?

DA BRESCIA. Your experience will cover such cases?

GABRIOTTO. I have a note of the exact number in my journal.

DA BRESCIA. Produce your journal when the time is ripe. For the moment take note of *my* nightmares. Suppose that my—complaint—lives a short distance from the Piazza San Marco, has two firm legs, and a short blonde beard. It has a wife to whom I write sonnets, and a position at Court which might fall to me if it were vacated.

GABRIOTTO. Hm!

DA BRESCIA. A spark lights in your eye. There is my complaint, and I would be cured. You have dealt with such requests before?

GABRIOTTO [*uneasily*]. I have heard of them.

DA BRESCIA. Something swift is preferred which leaves no trace. What do you recommend—an extract of adders' tongues? You will be well paid.

GABRIOTTO [*confused*]. Your rival's weight in ducats could not pay me. I should be a happier man this morning if your excellency had not—honoured me—with this visit. [*Going over to the steps, he tries ineffectively to urge DA BRESCIA out.*] I—I—wish your excellency good day. I—I am sorry, but I—have not your—remedy to hand.

DA BRESCIA [*rising and going over to him, speaking soothingly*]. I understand your reluctance. I appreciate your shudder of repugnance every time you comply with such a request.

GABRIOTTO [*sharply*]. Every time?

DA BRESCIA [*firmly*]. Every time. [*He produces a purse, lightly tossing it into the air, and catching it again.*] Look, man. Listen, man. Money. Real gold jingling in a purse—not my rival's weight in metaphors.

GABRIOTTO [*shaken*]. You have come to the wrong shop. I do not sell death.

DA BRESCIA. It has left here before now.

GABRIOTTO. Never.

DA BRESCIA. Yes.

GABRIOTTO. No!

[*He sits suddenly on the small stool. DA BRESCIA, laughing gently, returns to his seat at left.*

DA BRESCIA [*sitting*]. I had not intended to frighten you into fits. Get up. Get up, and put your mind at ease: there is no such rival, no such wife, and no such complaint to be cured. I have a quaint sense of humour. Of course, you know the penalty for selling poison.

GABRIOTTO [*in a whisper*]. Every one knows.

DA BRESCIA. I forget which death, but it is sure to be painful, and lingering.

GABRIOTTO. Then your excellency realizes why I do not sell poison.

DA BRESCIA [*chuckling*]. Yes, yes, of course. [*Turning sharply, and firing the question*] Don't you?

GABRIOTTO [*jumping up with a little shriek*]. No!

[*DA BRESCIA laughs.*

GABRIOTTO [*tottering over to him*]. Who are you? What are you? A man or a devil?

DA BRESCIA. A little of each, my friend. I am an officer of the Court. My name is Alberto da Brescia.

GABRIOTTO. I have not heard the name before.

DA BRESCIA. I am not seen a great deal. It is my duty to ensure that the citizens of this state do not stray from the straight and narrow path of the law. I nose out criminals. I might be called a State Ferret. Before the felon can be brought to trial, however, evidence must be obtained.

GABRIOTTO. The way you tried with me.

DA BRESCIA. Exactly.

GABRIOTTO [*trying to sound indignant*]. Then—then if I may say so, it is very wrong to tempt poor men into doing wrong just to make more of your position. If I had not resisted temptation I should now be on my way to a dungeon?

DA BRESCIA [*smiling*]. Why do you imagine you are not now on your way to a dungeon?

GABRIOTTO [*blustering*]. But I—I refused to sell.

DA BRESCIA [*pleasantly*]. It would have shortened your trial a little, but it was not necessary. I have evidence enough to hang you twenty times. Your servant has been—indiscreet.

GABRIOTTO. Miserable woman! She shan't have another chance. I shall dismiss her. But you didn't believe all her tales?

DA BRESCIA. I'm not a fool. I know a gossip when I hear one.

GABRIOTTO [*with a sigh of relief*]. Your excellency is mercy itself.
[*He moves to left centre.*]

DA BRESCIA. But I still believe that you have been retailing poison.

GABRIOTTO [*turning violently*]. I have not.

DA BRESCIA. The evidence says that you have.

GABRIOTTO. Then the evidence lies.

DA BRESCIA [*rising, smoothly*]. Your trial shall decide that.

GABRIOTTO [*gesticulating wildly*]. Trial? Where is your proof? You have no proof. You came down to my workshop to-day to bribe me into sticking my head into a noose. I cannot prevent your dragging me to a trial, but I shall prevent you declaring me guilty. A fine fool you'll look when I am pronounced innocent. That will not be good for your position at Court.

DA BRESCIA [*musings*]. It may not.

GABRIOTTO [*recovering himself*]. I should like you to remember that—excellency.

x DA BRESCIA [*moving to GABRIOTTO*]. You are suggesting that I may be wrong?

x GABRIOTTO. I do hope you are.

DA BRESCIA. I have ways of discovery. [*Gently, but firmly, he forces GABRIOTTO on to the small stool.*] Here is a coincidence. You installed yourself in this cellar five years ago. A month later old Guelpho died. We all knew him for an extortionate moneylender and an insatiable lecher, but he is dead and that is done with. His doctors were convinced that he had been poisoned, but could not make up their minds just how. Four different doses had been applied, any one of which might have proved fatal. To prevent embarrassment in high places the affair was hushed up. . . .

[*The bell rings.*]

GABRIOTTO. Most interesting, but . . .

DA BRESCIA. Since that time twenty leading citizens have mingled their dust with that of our cemetery. It is true that among them were usurers, panders, and wife-beaters, but that has nothing to do with the fact that in each case their breath failed suddenly. They may have been crushed by the weight of their own sins. However, I have other theories.

GABRIOTTO. Me?

DA BRESCIA [*smiling*]. You.

[*The bell rings furiously.*]

GABRIOTTO. But there is no proof. . . .

DA BRESCIA [*shrugging his shoulders*]. I will confess. There is no proof.

GABRIOTTO. Heaven is merciful!

DA BRESCIA. But proof may be obtained.

GABRIOTTO [*breathlessly*]. How?

DA BRESCIA. You would do well to guard your secrets, apothecary—as I do mine. You have another customer. Hide me where I can overhear all that passes between you. What do you think of that? If all is innocent I shall leave and disturb you no more—to-day.

GABRIOTTO. I won't see him.

EMILIA [*shouting into the cellar*]. Have you finished down there? There's another—person to see you.

GABRIOTTO. Tell him to go away! I'll admit no more customers.

DA BRESCIA [*hissing in his ear*]. Refuse, and you have admitted your guilt. Your head is as good as impaled on the city gate.

GABRIOTTO [*shuddering*]. Ugh!

EMILIA. The party won't go away—says it's urgent—must see you confidentially.

GABRIOTTO. No!

DA BRESCIA. Ah—ha.

EMILIA. Are you awake down there?

DA BRESCIA. Show him down.

GABRIOTTO [*feebly echoing*]. Show him down.

DA BRESCIA. Now conceal me in that alcove, and pass me your stool.

[*He sits down in the left corner of alcove on the smaller stool which GABRIOTTO hands to him. He is cut off from the rest of the cellar by the desk, and the books on it. GABRIOTTO quickly transfers candelabra from desk to bench, leaving DA BRESCIA in shadow. VIOLANTE enters the cellar, turns, and calls up the steps.*]

VIOLANTE. Close the door. [The apothecary swings round.]

GABRIOTTO. Holy saints!

VIOLANTE [*smiling*]. No. Violante del Ponte Nero.

[DA BRESCIA leaps to his feet, remembers where he is, and sits down again. VIOLANTE shrieks.]

GABRIOTTO. What alarms you, my lady?

VIOLANTE. A rat. Didn't you hear it? [*Peering*] This place is so dark. Have you been burning bones?

GABRIOTTO. A few herbs bubbling over the fire. If you would sit here by the candles . . .

[*He carries the large stool from the desk to front left end of bench, giving an apprehensive look towards the spot where the officer is hidden. VIOLANTE sits in the light. She is a slight, pretty thing in her late teens, expensively dressed, and with the ways of a kitten—a tiger kitten.*

GABRIOTTO [*with an unconvincing bedside manner*]. We have plenty of light here. Now. How can I help you? I will make notes of your requirements. I keep a journal as you see—very helpful as a scientific record. [*He is drawn back to his desk.*

VIOLANTE [*after a slight pause*]. How do your customers usually begin?

GABRIOTTO. I beg your pardon?

VIOLANTE. Must you coax them, or do they flood you with their troubles? You have a sympathetic mouth. Your face says that you would never betray a trust. I can tell by your eyes. Will you be my friend?

GABRIOTTO [*nervously, going over to her*]. If you wish it, my lady. Now if I could make a note of . . .

VIOLANTE. Give me your hand. Promise to help me.

GABRIOTTO. My skill is the best that I can offer.

VIOLANTE [*taking his hand*]. Give me your help.

GABRIOTTO. If I distil anything that will ease you you shall have it.

VIOLANTE. Promise that.

GABRIOTTO. I promise. [*He disentangles himself.*] Now, an idea of the symptoms . . . [*He returns to his desk, and picks up his pen.*

VIOLANTE. Name any price, but sell the stuff.

GABRIOTTO. If I may prescribe . . .

VIOLANTE [*rising*]. I will prescribe.

GABRIOTTO [*fearing the worst*]. What?

VIOLANTE. Poison.

[*DA BRESCIA laughs. VIOLANTE backs a step to R.*

GABRIOTTO [*trying to drown her demands*]. No, no, no, no, no. I don't deal in it.

VIOLANTE [*frightened herself*]. I said that we should talk in secret. What is that?

GABRIOTTO. That?

VIOLANTE. The thing cackling in the corner.

GABRIOTTO. No one.

VIOLANTE. I heard it laugh.

GABRIOTTO [*producing his familiar*]. It has been dead and dusty for years. The darkness and the smell of the retorts affect the eyes and ears. Sometimes even I think I hear him talk, but he has not so much as squeaked since his last breath. He could not. It would be unscientific. [*He replaces it on the desk.*]

VIOLANTE. Don't turn away, and try to lie. I know your name, and I know your reputation. You could wither a person by the dust of your fingers.

GABRIOTTO [*frantically moving to left centre, and trying to motion her to speak softly*]. Hush! Lies can kill like cold steel. I deal in cures.

VIOLANTE. One of your potions could cure all my ills at a draught. What is your price for——

GABRIOTTO. Not that word!

VIOLANTE [*pouting*]. For saving my life. Come into this circle of light, and look into my face. Would you sentence this to eternity in a tomb?

GABRIOTTO [*drawn towards her*]. Say no more: I shall sympathize: I shall weaken: I always do.

VIOLANTE. You shudder to think of it. Even you, dry bones and all. Listen to me . . .

GABRIOTTO. I am not a swashbuckler. It is not my trade to fight dragons, and rescue damsels.

VIOLANTE. But you have a heart.

GABRIOTTO. I am an apothecary, not a hero.

VIOLANTE [*laying her hands caressingly on his shoulders*]. But you are a man, and I know what men are made of. Sit down and listen.

GABRIOTTO [*sinking down*]. Oh! My head is as good as grinning on the town gate.

VIOLANTE [*close to him*]. I have had lovers. No, you are not shocked. Something would be wrong with the world if I had not had lovers. I was born to it. But now—now my heart is fixed upon one man. Now I know how much pain there can be in loving. I am in love.

GABRIOTTO. Ah, yes. But I could purge your love with the merest capsule.

VIOLANTE. My life without love! I hold a man's heart in the crook of my finger. It is so now, and I would keep it so always. For his sake—a cup of your deadliest medicine. For his sake—poison.

GABRIOTTO. For him?

VIOLANTE. For my constant lover. For Alberto da Brescia.

[GABRIOTTO and DA BRESCIA leap to their feet simultaneously. VIOLANTE shrieks, and clutches the apothecary.

VIOLANTE. Terrors swarm in the corners of your cell. Cannot you understand how desperate a woman must be to brave your rats? Cannot you feel my heart beating against your breast?

GABRIOTTO [*faintly*]. Yes.

VIOLANTE. Look into my eyes. Could you look into the eyes of a stricken deer, and feel no pity?

GABRIOTTO [*sinking down again*]. No.

VIOLANTE. Feel my arms around you. Can you smell the perfume of my hair and still deny me two-pennyworth of common herbs?

GABRIOTTO [*weakly, sinking down again*]. I must. Heavenly powers, I must.

VIOLANTE. You are distraught. I should have been more gentle. Rest your head back, so, and let my fingers caress your brows—poor wrinkled brows. Doesn't your head ache with all that load of learning?

GABRIOTTO. Shade of Galen, my master, protect me now. I am weakening.

VIOLANTE. I am not cruel, am I, to snuff out an unwanted life?

GABRIOTTO. He would cling to it.

VIOLANTE. He?

GABRIOTTO. Even bewitched in your arms he would not seek a quietus.

VIOLANTE. But the poison is not for him.

GABRIOTTO. No?

VIOLANTE [*laughing*]. For his wife, simpleton. Only for his wife.

[DA BRESCIA sits again with a sigh of relief.

VIOLANTE [*crossing to up left centre*]. The dragon at the gate. The dragon, [*turning*] Giannetta da Brescia.

GABRIOTTO [*brusquely*]. It makes no difference. I cannot sell

poison. I would not sell poison, even if fifty lovers should send their ladies to persuade me.

VIOLANTE [*imploringly*]. Just once.

GABRIOTTO. Never!

[*She returns to GABRIOTTO, seductively. DA BRESCIA vainly tries to attract his attention.*

GABRIOTTO. Even though my blood flows thicker than water; even though your lips pay with kisses worth more than ducats; I will not. I—will—not. Mmmmmmm . . . [*She kisses him.*

VIOLANTE. Even so?

GABRIOTTO [*subsiding against the bench*]. Even so. [*At last he notices DA BRESCIA gesticulating.*] My head is reeling. I must think. [*Rising*]. One moment. I must think.

[*He totters over to his desk, and flutters the pages of his journal.*

DA BRESCIA. Pssst. [GABRIOTTO peeps over the edge of his desk.

DA BRESCIA. Sell the stuff.

GABRIOTTO. Eh?

DA BRESCIA. Send her away with it.

GABRIOTTO. But your wife—the law—my head.

DA BRESCIA. Ask no questions. Do it quickly.

VIOLANTE. Does the dried jackanapes among your papers argue better than my kisses?

GABRIOTTO [*standing with his back to the desk*]. He says nothing. He is stuffed.

VIOLANTE. I heard you taking council from him. What passed in your whispers? Does he say 'yes' or 'no'?

GABRIOTTO. He says . . .

VIOLANTE. Say it.

GABRIOTTO. Yes.

VIOLANTE [*with a sigh of relief*]. Yes!

GABRIOTTO [*bustling over to the bench, and making a clatter among his apparatus*]. But I'll take no payment. This is a favour.

VIOLANTE [*in front of the bench*]. Quickly. Let me see you mix it.

GABRIOTTO [*pouring some of the liquid from a pan on the fire into a beaker, tipping in a powder, and stirring until it fixes*]. It will come to ill, I warn you. Trust babes with cannon, and no house in the city will be safe. My fingers are trembling: they are reluctant to perform such deeds. Ah, poor woman! No. I cannot do it.

[*He puts the beaker on the bench.*

VIOLANTE [*picking it up, and continuing to stir*]. It will be swift?

GABRIOTTO. As an arrow to the heart.

VIOLANTE. It must not leave a minute for second thoughts or misgivings. Oh, what a smell! We must disguise that: it must not spoil her appetite. It is mixed. [*She hands the beaker back.*] Which is the best way to administer the dose?

GABRIOTTO [*brusquely*]. Any way you please. [*He fills a small bottle from the beaker.*] You have enough to kill a horse. There. The bottle is corked, and my hands are clear of it. [*He thrusts the bottle at VIOLANTE.*] In a posset at night is best. It was so with old Guelpho.

VIOLANTE [*with unusual interest*]. Was it so?

GABRIOTTO. My mind was running on. . . . He was found in the morning. . . . Your thoughts brought him to my mind.

VIOLANTE. Your—payment, you said?

GABRIOTTO. No money. I was hard pressed to part with the mixture.

VIOLANTE [*going up to the steps*]. Then take my thanks. I would kiss you again, but you are not an attractive old man, are you? [*She blows a kiss to him.*] Does that warm your heart? [*She sighs, and mounts steps.*] A kiss thrown away—what a waste. But I'll bring more of the same currency—if ever I visit you again. [*In doorway*] Remember me.

[*She goes out laughing, the apothecary watching her from the foot of the stairs. DABRESCIA comes from his hiding-place to left centre.*]

DA BRESCIA. It was so with old Guelpho—even so. Your thoughts brought him to my mind.

[*GABRIOTTO comes down to him, biting his nails.*]
Can you protest your innocence now? Think fast, apothecary, I can hear the creak of dungeon doors.

GABRIOTTO. You wouldn't prosecute now?

DA BRESCIA. Why not?

GABRIOTTO. But—but—you sat in the corner issuing orders. I only obeyed. That isn't a crime.

DA BRESCIA. If I ordered you to slit a throat, do you think the gallows would reject you?

GABRIOTTO. But—but . . .

DA BRESCIA [*choking off the interruption*]. The law is the law. It may have its perversions, but we are barbarians without it. I am

grieved to see you suffer—but there it is. Consider yourself a martyr to civilization, and march blithely to the gallows.

GABRIOTTO. The gallows!

DA BRESCIA [*lightly*]. A figure of speech; it may be the block, or the wheel, or the stake.

GABRIOTTO [*despairingly*]. Why?

DA BRESCIA. You are guilty. You must die. It is as simple as that.

GABRIOTTO. I am innocent!

DA BRESCIA. Tut. You must learn to lie more convincingly, or your trial won't last five minutes.

GABRIOTTO. I am an instrument. I am no more guilty than the hangman's noose. Merciful heavens, what put that idea into my head?

DA BRESCIA [*crossing GABRIOTTO and sitting on stool by the bench*]. Continue. I am interested.

GABRIOTTO [*urgently*]. Poison brings its own punishment. The circle of crime is completed by time. You are unscientific; and your logic misdirects you only to the initial crime. Wait until you have seen the machinery of Nemesis working like a mill-wheel, and then you will see a murderer struggling in his own tangled plans. Killing me will have no effect at all. We are only bystanders.

DA BRESCIA. For a man on the point of arrest your eloquence is surprising. I feel misgivings. What a pity to lop off a head so full of brains.

GABRIOTTO [*clasping his hands fervently*]. A shame. A waste. A blow to science.

DA BRESCIA. Why, Euclid and Pythagoras would be spilled in the straw! I set high value upon learning.

GABRIOTTO [*eagerly*]. Yes, yes. I too.

DA BRESCIA [*changing his tone to one very matter-of-fact*]. But I also value my wife.

GABRIOTTO. But you . . .

DA BRESCIA [*ignoring him*]. Poor Giannetta. I feel for her. Though, if only she knew, I am sure she would be comforted by the thought of preceding you by such a fraction of time. [*He smiles sweetly.*]

GABRIOTTO [*almost crying with disappointment, and stamping about in fear and temper*]. Confound your wife, sir! Confound the law, sir! Confound you, sir! Why cannot I be allowed a little peace? I asked for nothing more than to be left to my distilling apparatus. But no!

I am pestered by nagging servants, murdering Jezebels, and—and—interfering policemen. Confound them all, and the devil take your wife!

[*He snivels.*]

DA BRESCIA [*shrugging his shoulders*]. Perhaps he will. Remember me to her when you meet.

GABRIOTTO [*sulkily*]. I won't.

DA BRESCIA [*consolingly*]. Don't take it so much to heart. Perhaps a minor devil will let you brew your concoctions over the brimstone bonfires. There is only an interlude in the hands of the executioner, then you may continue with your experiments to the last tick of eternity.

GABRIOTTO [*falling on his knees, facing front*]. Mercy!

DA BRESCIA. You should thank me for it. Hark!

[*Outside is a confused babble of voices, EMILIA's and another's. The other finally shouts down EMILIA—it is GIANNETTA DA BRESCIA.*]

GIANNETTA [*off*]. I have more important business on hand than brawling with fishwives. I know he is here.

DA BRESCIA [*jumping to his feet*]. My wife!

GIANNETTA [*off*]. Down these steps, I suppose. Ugh! Nothing but poison could ooze from such a den.

DA BRESCIA [*in a hoarse whisper to GABRIOTTO*]. Not a word if you value your life.

[*He flies back to his hiding-place.*]

GABRIOTTO [*wailing and raising his arms in supplication*]. Oh, Lucifer, not another! [*He bows his head to the ground, as GIANNETTA DA BRESCIA, closely followed by EMILIA, enters and descends. GIANNETTA is a domineering woman, a few years older than ALBERTO.*]

[*Flinging his arms up again*] Lord, let me escape this day and I'll give up my practice! [*bowing again to the ground*] I'll earn my living sweeping the streets. I'll—

[*GIANNETTA plants her foot on his posterior, and sends him sprawling.*]

GIANNETTA [*on GABRIOTTO's right*]. Still at your devotions, man? Get up!

EMILIA [*on GABRIOTTO's left*]. I told her that you had more to do than waste your time pandering to old women.

GIANNETTA [*turning on her*]. Keep a civil tongue in your head, unless you want to see the inside of the city gaol. I am Giannetta da Brescia.

GABRIOTTO. Angels defend me!

GIANNETTA. You have heard of my husband.

GABRIOTTO. I have.

GIANNETTA. Then you know how I am to be treated. Dismiss this coarse creature. The matter in hand must be dealt with privately.

GABRIOTTO [*turning round on his knees*]. You may go, Emilia. I will call for you when the Signora is ready to leave.

EMILIA. There's one patient who deserves no better than you give her.

GIANNETTA. Woman, I have only to raise my finger, and . . .

GABRIOTTO. Go. Go quickly. All she says of gaols and worse is true.

EMILIA [*turning and stamping up the steps*]. Better be finished with your plotting before my pies are done, or you'll be disturbed again.

[*She goes out and slams the door.*]

GIANNETTA. Off your knees, man. You needn't grovel. [*She seats herself at the bench.*] An odour hovers over these bottles that reminds me of . . . [*She picks up the beaker and sniffs.*] Mmm. Do you make incense?

GABRIOTTO [*scrambling to his feet*]. That is a salve I have just prepared—a compound of aromatic herbs. I had the recipe from my godmother.

GIANNETTA. One of your cure-alls.

GABRIOTTO. It would cure—most ills.

GIANNETTA. The jar is warm. You have just prepared it, eh? For whom?

GABRIOTTO [*taking the beaker from her*]. A customer. A young lady.

GIANNETTA [*sharply*]. Violante del Ponte Nero! Don't splutter, and lie! I know every movement she makes. My servant has followed her for weeks. Now you know why I am here.

GABRIOTTO [*nervously taking the beaker behind the bench*]. You mystify me.

GIANNETTA. Dolt!

GABRIOTTO. Yes, signora.

GIANNETTA. She bought poison from you.

GABRIOTTO. No, signora.

GIANNETTA. Liar!

GABRIOTTO [*at right end of bench*]. Yes, signora.

GIANNETTA. I'll have you hung if you quibble with me. She took away poison, and intends it for my bedtime posset. How much did she buy?

GABRIOTTO [*coming down-stage a step*]. Enough.

GIANNETTA. For what?

GABRIOTTO. To kill a horse.

GIANNETTA. Are you trying to be funny? I'll have your throat slit if you try to be funny. So she intends to line my belly with those ditch-coloured dregs. Was it to be swift, or slow?

GABRIOTTO. Very swift.

GIANNETTA. But agonizing, I suppose?

GABRIOTTO. Quite painless.

GIANNETTA [*rather put out*]. Painless, eh? Thoughtful of her. My ideal poison would bring a lingering end, with a short breathing space for counting sins towards the last gasp. This stuff might bring a merciful release. That is not my idea of revenge. I want my full due.

GABRIOTTO. Doubtless you will receive it, signora.

[*Busies himself with apparatus at right end of bench.*]

GIANNETTA. Are you trying to be impertinent? I'll have your tongue cut out if you're impertinent. I want her to realize what it means to cross a woman like me. I have a soft heart, and I know how to be sentimental. Heaven knows the hours I wept through when my first husband died. Poor Guelpho! But I can be granite if I'm thwarted: I grind like mill-wheels. I am granite at this moment. What is your lowest price for sudden death?

GABRIOTTO [*piously evading the issue*]. Life and Death are in the hands of Heaven.

GIANNETTA. I want a quotation, not a sermon.

GABRIOTTO. I do not sell death.

GIANNETTA. Nonsense. Your name's a byword for ridding the town of vermin, relatives, and husbands.

GABRIOTTO. I will not sell.

GIANNETTA [*rising like a thundercloud*]. You refuse?

GABRIOTTO. Courage! I must.

GIANNETTA [*glaring at him through his apparatus*]. A refusal to me? I'll have you garrotted if you refuse. I'm in no mood for coping with your conscience. When the pair are cold under marble, then I'll think of dropping a tear.

GABRIOTTO. You'd kill two?

GIANNETTA. Call it execution. [*Moving up at left of bench*] That slut and my husband must pay for their excursions. Why are you shivering and gibbering among your apparatus? Hemlock, yew-berries, ratsbane, and toadstools, this instant! I, Giannetta da Brescia, have been exposed to the mockery of market women. Understand what that means! Death to some one.

GABRIOTTO [*coming round the bench*]. To me if I serve you.

GIANNETTA. I have watched my husband lavishing his affections on that gilded slut—squandering poor Guelpho's fortune on brooches, rings, necklaces—and now—now a villa in the suburbs. Oh, that I should see a rival enjoying south-blown breezes while I sweat in the city. And with my money! Would you endure that?

[*In her indignation she stalks over to the desk. GABRIOTTO runs after her in an agony of suspense.*]

GABRIOTTO [*panting*]. No, no, no. The stars spin destinies: we must endure them.

GIANNETTA [*hitting the desk with her fist*]. Nonsense! Poison! [*Crossing him, she sweeps back to the bench, and rattles the bottles.*] Must I help myself to your potions? Ah, the power that sleeps in this jumble of crockery. With this bench I could rule this city: I could rule Italy: I could rule the world. [*She picks up a canister.*] What is this packet, scarecrow?

GABRIOTTO [*squeaking with fright, and running up to steps*]. Put it down. Please put it down!

GIANNETTA. Potent, eh?

GABRIOTTO. Gunpowder. [*Puts a finger in each ear*] Touch it with a spark, and we shall all fly beyond the reach of poison. [*He claps his hands over his eyes.*] I'll resign my trade. I'll brick up this cellar.

GIANNETTA. This, then. [*She changes the box for another.*]

GABRIOTTO [*removes one hand and peeps*]. Corn plaster.

GIANNETTA [*picking up the beaker*]. And this? The salve you prepared for the 'young lady'—and the pot is half full. I'll take a measure of your godmother's recipe, and experiment on my husband. Will that improve his health?

GABRIOTTO [*coming down a step centre, fearfully*]. It is deadlier than snake-bite.

GIANNETTA [*with regret*]. But painless. What a pity! The dose is a painful necessity, but I would rather it had been a little more painful.

The next loving-cup he drinks with his creature shall be his last. [*She makes for the stairs, still clutching the beaker. The apothecary makes vague restraining gestures.*] Stand aside! [*She pauses on the bottom step.*] You needn't hold out your hand for payment. I always insist upon my moneysworth from tradesmen before settling their dues. I shall pass your account—after the funeral.

[*She sweeps out. DA BRESCIA hurries from his hiding-place, tripping over his stool.*]

GABRIOTTO [*advancing, gabbling*]. I did not sell it. She stole it.

DA BRESCIA [*also shaken*]. Stop chattering, nincompoop. My life is in danger. She spoke of killing me—me!

GABRIOTTO. It is just as I said. Crimes come around in a full circle, I said. Your mistress buys poison for your wife. Your wife steals poison for your mistress. It is like an equation in algebra—precise and logical. Everything cancels out.

DA BRESCIA. Including me. Stop dithering!

GABRIOTTO. You will see it work out in time. You have only to wait.

DA BRESCIA. Wait? My wife means to murder me. If I wait another half-hour my passage is booked to Purgatory.

GABRIOTTO [*helpfully*]. Perhaps your mistress will poison your wife before your wife poisons you.

DA BRESCIA. Perhaps. But if my wife poisons me before my mistress poisons her—what then?

GABRIOTTO. I shall be saved the worry of being arrested.

DA BRESCIA [*unsheathing his dagger*]. Hell-fire, and sudden death! Another joke like that, and I'll cut you off without the performance of a trial.

[GABRIOTTO *scuttles for safety behind his bench. With self-pity*] Every night since we married Giannetta has set out a cup of spiced wine for me. Two thousand times I have run the risk of being launched off without a minute for second thoughts or misgivings. How can I live with her any longer? I must launch her off first. Apothecary—poison!

GABRIOTTO. No, excellency. Not again!

DA BRESCIA. Hemlock and henbane—whatever the witch ordered for me—a double dose to give *her* a lasting good-night. Mix! Mix! Are you frozen in the corner?

GABRIOTTO. Selling poison means certain death. I forget which death, but it is painful and lingering.

DA BRESCIA [*impatiently*]. Over to your mortar and pestle.

GABRIOTTO. You ordered that before, and five minutes afterwards ordered my neck to be stretched.

DA BRESCIA. Cross me and I'll cut your throat.

GABRIOTTO. My life is ended whatever I do, but you shall follow me to the brimstone bonfire.

DA BRESCIA [*raging*]. I'll have you burn before then—worm.

[*He hurls himself towards GABRIOTTO's side of the bench.*

The apothecary dodges him, and runs round back for safety to the cellar steps.

Come within my knife's reach, and you'll cheat the executioner. Poison, or you die!

GABRIOTTO [*feeling himself a martyr already*]. Never!

DA BRESCIA [*beating right end of bench in frustration*]. Infernal fire, devils, and lasting damnation! [*His hand falls upon the canister of gunpowder.*] Ah! Little hero, forget your orator's box for a minute, and think of graves, corruption, and decay. Yours. Do you remember these black salts?

GABRIOTTO. Gunpowder.

DA BRESCIA. And if I—pitch it into the furnace?

GABRIOTTO. Perdition!

DA BRESCIA. Let us bargain. My life for yours. Doesn't that please your paltry soul—haggling over a snuff of eternity? Are you prepared to die? I'll blow the pair of us to Hell if you don't obey me this instant.

GABRIOTTO. If only I'd lived a better man!

DA BRESCIA [*raising the canister*]. Now!

GABRIOTTO. No!

DA BRESCIA. You will trade?

GABRIOTTO. Your excellency has persuaded me.

[*Slowly he crosses back to his bench and mixes the same preparation as for VIOLANTE.*

DA BRESCIA. The same brew that my wife took with her. [*His spirits rising again, as he saunters to the smaller stool*] There's a touch of irony. It amuses me. [*Sitting*] I hope it will amuse her too. I can imagine the surprise written on her face in the seconds between her last draught and the choir of angels. Haven't you finished yet? You mixed it quickly enough for her. You're not cheating me, are you? It is deadly?

GABRIOTTO [*innocently*]. Would your excellency care to sample it?

DA BRESCIA [*unamused*]. Your witty backchat will kill you yet.

GABRIOTTO [*surprised*]. Witty? Me? I must look for a bottle or jar. Signorina Violante took my last. I was not prepared for business this morning.

DA BRESCIA. What have you used for mixing? That will serve. Hand it to me.

GABRIOTTO. But there is more here than you will need in a lifetime.

DA BRESCIA. Enough to kill a horse?

GABRIOTTO. Enough for a cavalry regiment.

DA BRESCIA [*taking it*]. When the doctors have left, it may come in handy. A number of acquaintances might be happier in winding sheets. That concludes the transaction. [*Rising*] I presume you will require payment?

GABRIOTTO [*coming round to him*]. Not from your excellency.

DA BRESCIA. Why this sudden generosity?

GABRIOTTO. I am happier this time if I can be of use . . .

DA BRESCIA [*suspiciously*]. Hm?

GABRIOTTO. If the justices should think betimes of my trial, or if any question should arise of my being turned from this cellar, I should be forced to bear witness that Ser Alberto da Brescia was my best customer.

DA BRESCIA [*feeling for his dagger*]. Why, you double-tongued reptile! [*He smiles.*] A diplomat. [*He goes up to the steps.*] You needn't fear. This morning I have been converted. I now perceive that I have been dealing with a useful member of the community. Good day. [*He goes out.*]

GABRIOTTO [*returning to his bench*]. Wretch! Wretch! Wretch! Dedicated to compounding cures, I dispense three parcels of death in one morning. What a mess! Slops and puddles. [*He mops up the bench with a piece of rag.*] I hurried. A hastily made-up prescription can be dangerous. Some one might die of it. [*Suddenly he bends down.*] What is this? [*He lifts on to the bench a crock identical with that on the fire. He sniffs inside.*] Oh, my! [*He turns to the one on the fire, and sniffs that.*] Oh! Oh! Oh! [*He turns to the first again, and wails.*] Woman! Woman! [*Shouting*] Emilia! Come down here at once. Emilia! You interfering baggage, what have you done? Emilia, come here.

EMILIA [*appearing and coming down*]. I'm coming. You'll have the neighbours rushing in with your screaming. Are the pies ready?

GABRIOTTO. I've had enough of your pastrycook's trumpery for one day. When did you change these crocks?

EMILIA. I never touched 'em.

GABRIOTTO. You meddling dish-rag, you must have.

EMILIA. Ah, I remember now. I took one off while I raked up the fire. I must have put the wrong one back. I don't suppose it matters.

GABRIOTTO. Powers above, woman! Don't you know that this contains poison? [*Transfixed, he clasps the crock to himself.*] I'm ruined—ruined. Oh!

EMILIA. Then I must have changed it for this one. [*Tastes contents.*] Mmmm! [*Tastes again.*] Aaaaah!

GABRIOTTO [*suddenly coming to, and seeing her*]. Put that down! You lunatic! Don't you realize what you've done? Those sinners wanted to kill one another. And I've given them bottles of *that*. They will go mad. What are you staring at, you fool? It's my love elixir—*my best aphrodisiac*.

EMILIA [*smiling strangely, her eyes alight*]. They won't—go—mad. No-o-o-o! They'll have the time of their lives. [*Advances on him.*]

GABRIOTTO. No! [*Retreating*] Emilia! No! No!

EMILIA. Come to me, my little pigeon. Come, my little cauliflower!

GABRIOTTO. Help! Help!

EMILIA. My pretty mannikin.

GABRIOTTO. Help! Help! HELP! }

[*Together.*]

[*In a panic he runs, sending the table, with its litter and gear, crashing as he rushes blindly round the room with*

EMILIA close behind him.

QUICK CURTAIN

April Dawn

By Philip Johnson

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CHARACTERS

(in the order of their appearance)

KATHIE KEMP

MISS UPSHOTT, *a reporter*

CARRIE MARKBY, *a neighbour*

HAROLD MARKBY, *her husband*

STANLEY KEMP, *Kathie's husband*

MRS PRESCOTT

*The action of the play passes in the sitting-room of the Kemps' house
near London, on an early evening in summer.*

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton
Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York*

April Dawn

SCENE: *The sitting-room of the Kemps' small, semi-detached house in one of the nearer London suburbs. Early evening on a summer's day.*

The window, C. of the back wall, is veiled with thick net and framed by drapes and pelmet of some dark-coloured material. The door leading to the rest of the house is up L., and the fireplace is in the wall R. The room is neatly but inexpensively furnished, strikes a note of neatness and orderliness, and the touch of a house-proud woman's hand is everywhere in evidence. A not very large square table stands C., with an embroidered table-runner and a bowl of flowers. Upright chairs stand above and L. of the table. There is a small sideboard below the door L., with a few pieces of electro-plate, two or three framed photographs, a plate of oranges, a bottle of wine and several glasses. A sofa stands against the wall L. of the window and a china cabinet R. of the window. Above the fireplace is an easy chair and below the fireplace is a fireside chair. A few mediocre pictures hang upon the walls.

When the curtain rises, KATHIE KEMP is seated in the easy chair, sewing. Her workbag is on the floor beside her. She is almost thirty, and as neat in dress and appearance as the room in which we find her. She speaks with a fairly strong North-country accent. Of her actual looks it is not perhaps at this moment altogether fair to judge; her forehead is marred by a frown, her lips are set in a thin, tight line, her attitude is incomprehensibly bolt-upright, and there is a suggestion of cut-and-thrust in the to-and-fro flash of her needle, by which signs and tokens we gather that the inner feelings of MRS KATHIE KEMP are in no very tranquil state. For a moment she continues to pull and jab with her needle, then there is a knock on the front door off. KATHIE utters an impatient exclamation under her breath, rises, puts her sewing on the table, crosses and exits. The sound of the front door being opened is heard, followed by a brief murmur of voices, and the closing of the door.

MISS UPSHOTT *enters*. KATHIE *follows her on*. MISS UPSHOTT *is a trim-looking young woman, wearing a plainly cut suit, an equally plain hat, and carrying a handbag*.

MISS UPSHOTT [*as she enters*]. I do hope you'll forgive me for butting in like this. It is Mrs Kemp, isn't it? Mrs Stanley Kemp?

KATHIE. That's right. [*She closes the door*].

MISS UPSHOTT [*holding out her hand*]. Then, how do you do, Mrs Kemp? My name's Upshott. Frances Upshott.

KATHIE [*with a brief hand-shake; somewhat abruptly*]. How do you do, Miss Upshott? Will you sit down for a minute?

[*She indicates the chair L. of the table*].

MISS UPSHOTT. Thank you.

[*She moves to the chair L. of the table, draws it out, places it to face down R., and sits*].

[*KATHIE crosses above the table to the fireplace*].

[*She places her handbag on the table and looks around the room*].

What a charming little house this is. And such a pretty name, *The Laburnums*; though I don't think I noticed a laburnum-tree.

KATHIE. There was. I had it rooted up. Always dropping its flowers and leaves and mucking up the place. As for the house being charming, it's as jerry-built as they make 'em.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, dear.

KATHIE. Still, needs must when the devil drives, and we can't afford nothing better.

MISS UPSHOTT. I'm sure you keep it beautifully, anyway.

KATHIE. I do my best. [*She pauses*]. What is it you want me to make, Miss Upshott?

MISS UPSHOTT. Make?

KATHIE. I'm no good at frillies and fancies, but if it's something plain you're after, I dare say I could oblige.

MISS UPSHOTT. I—I'm afraid there's some little mistake, Mrs Kemp.

KATHIE. Oh, I thought . . . You see, I do a little dress-making—privately, for just a few select customers. I thought p'raps some one had recommended me. [*She picks up the work-bag from the floor*].

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, no—though I'm sure you're a very good dressmaker.

KATHIE [*picking up the sewing from the table*]. Well, I'm better on

sleeves than whoever made that costume you're wearing, though I do say it myself.

MISS UPSHOTT. Why? Aren't they . . . ?

KATHIE. They don't sit. I bet you didn't half pay for it too, eh?

MISS UPSHOTT. Twenty-seven guineas.

KATHIE [*stuffing the sewing into the work-bag*]. You were robbed.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, dear. I shall have to come to you next time, shan't I? But—but what I'm really here for now is to—well, I thought we might just have a little chat together, you and I.

KATHIE. Chat? Why?

MISS UPSHOTT. Well—er—you see . . .

KATHIE [*dropping the work-bag on to the floor, beside the easy-chair*]. Miss Upshott, are you in the habit of walking into folks' houses where they don't know you from Adam, and saying you've come for a chat?

MISS UPSHOTT [*with a nod*]. Oh, yes. I do it frequently.

KATHIE. Well, really. If I did such a thing, I'd expect to be sent packing, *and* with a flea in my ear, *and* serve me right.

MISS UPSHOTT [*quite coolly*]. Oh, of course, that does happen sometimes—one gets hardened.

KATHIE [*bluntly*]. Hardened, indeed! I'd need to be made of brass, myself. And, anyway, you've come to the wrong shop this time. I've no time for a chat, as you call it. I'm expecting my husband home for his tea, so . . .

MISS UPSHOTT [*rising; eagerly*]. You are? He is coming home to tea, then, is he? And afterwards, Mrs Kemp? What's he going to do then? How's Mr Kemp going to spend his evening? *That's* what I really want to know.

[*There is a pause. KATHIE looks at MISS UPSHOTT, then moves to R. of the table and faces her across it.*]

KATHIE [*very downright*]. Look here, Miss Whatever-your-name-is, let's get this straight: what's it to do with you how my husband spends his evening?

MISS UPSHOTT [*moving L.C.*]. Ordinarily, nothing at all. In fact, I couldn't care less. But *this* evening is different, isn't it, Mrs Kemp? For Mr Kemp, I mean.

[*KATHIE is about to speak. She checks KATHIE.*] No, please, let me explain: I'm a journalist, God help me, on the staff of *Feminine Foibles*, and to-day your

husband happens to be in the news. Now, what we want is the woman's angle: what you, his wife, think about it all.

KATHIE [*looking very steadily at her; rather more slowly*]. What I think is my affair. I can still call my thoughts my own, I hope.

MISS UPSHOTT. Not at a time like this, Mrs Kemp. Don't you understand? Thousand upon thousands of women are fancying themselves in your shoes this evening, wondering how they'd feel if they were you. Won't you give me a message for them?

[KATHIE gives a quick nod.]

Well?

KATHIE. Tell the silly so-and-so's to mind their own business.

MISS UPSHOTT [*after a little sigh*]. Oh, dear! And I did so hope you'd be helpful. [*She moves to L. of the table.*] At least, tell me one thing: is he or is he not going to spend the evening with—her?

KATHIE. Aye, that'd be telling, wouldn't it?

MISS UPSHOTT. But, that's just what I want you to do: to tell.

[KATHIE maintains a tight-lipped silence.]

[*Cajolingly*] Oh, come on, Mrs Kemp. Have a heart. I'm only doing my job, and I've got to take some sort of story back with me. It could mean the sack, if I don't.

[KATHIE looks at her in silence for a moment, then, after a little shrug, turns and moves down R.]

[*She interprets KATHIE's attitude as an encouraging sign.*] That's better! [*She picks up her bag from the table, sits L. of the table, and puts the bag on her knee.*] Now, let's just run over the facts, shall we? A month ago, a certain newspaper inaugurated a competition—for men only.

KATHIE [*with a little snort*]. H'm!

MISS UPSHOTT. They printed a dozen photographs of young ladies in—shall we call it *négligées*, Mrs Kemp?

KATHIE. You can, if you like. I know what I call it.

MISS UPSHOTT. The winner to be the man who placed them in the correct order of popularity. Yesterday your husband was proclaimed the lucky man.

[KATHIE tightens her lips and sits in the fireside chair down R.]

Is your husband, perhaps, an authority on—er—feminine *négligées*? I mean does his work bring him in touch?

KATHIE. Ferzey, Ferzey, and Stubbs.

MISS UPSHOTT. I beg your pardon?

KATHIE. Solicitors. He's a clerk. As for me—flannelette, cut plain.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh—quite.

KATHIE. Of course, *he* says it was just luck. Picked 'em out at random. At random, indeed!

MISS UPSHOTT. Well, whatever his qualifications, Mr Kemp won the prize. And the prize is—an evening with the glamour-girl of the moment, Hollywood's answer to Everyman's prayer, Miss April Dawn. You'll have seen her on the films, I suppose?

KATHIE. Aye, I've seen her. All of her—or nearly all. Disgusting, I call it.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, well, her face and figure are her fortune, you know. They're what she's paid for. That's her work.

KATHIE. Work! If I'd my way, I'd shove a scrubbing-brush in her hand, and make her do a spot of *real* work, for a change.

MISS UPSHOTT. Yes, yes, of course, but—anyway, the evening starts off with dinner at a West End hotel.

KATHIE. Lot of rich, messy food. He'll never stand it. I know his stomach like the back of my hand.

MISS UPSHOTT. Then a box at a theatre. And, finally, supper at London's gayest night club, *The Stuttering Parrot*.

KATHIE. What a name, eh? *Stuttering Parrot*? Daft, I call it.

MISS UPSHOTT. It's a very full evening, anyway. [*She pauses.*] There is, of course, an alternative: if the winner is not the type of man to enjoy that sort of thing . . .

KATHIE [*with a nod*]. Nice, steady, sensible type, you mean.

MISS UPSHOTT. He can accept a cheque for one hundred pounds instead.

KATHIE. And stay quiet and respectable in his own house, Miss Upshott: cold tongue, salad, home-made cake, and a pipe in the garden, last thing—and a hundred pounds in his pocket.

MISS UPSHOTT. In fact, an evening just like any other evening.

KATHIE. Except for the hundred pounds.

MISS UPSHOTT. Yes, I know, but—but, well, Mrs Kemp, which is it to be? How has Mr Kemp chosen? I'm dying to know.

KATHIE. So am I.

[*She rises abruptly and stands in front of the fireplace.*]

MISS UPSHOTT. But—don't you know?

[KATHIE shakes her head.]

Hasn't he—said anything?

KATHIE. Dumb as a drum with a hole in it.

MISS UPSHOTT. But surely—you've asked him?

KATHIE. Not me. I wouldn't demean myself.

MISS UPSHOTT. Well! Well, really! [*She rises.*] Is he—is he the sort of man who—er—keeps things to himself?

KATHIE. Not up to now. Always talked things over, we have, like it should be with husband and wife.

MISS UPSHOTT. But—this time?

KATHIE. Not a word.

MISS UPSHOTT. Still thinking it over, I suppose. Trying to decide.

KATHIE. It shouldn't need no thinking over—not for a respectable married man.

MISS UPSHOTT [*moving above the table*]. Of course—you're hoping he'll choose the hundred pounds?

KATHIE. Wouldn't you?

MISS UPSHOTT [*after a pause*]. I don't know—I'm not so sure [*She moves L.C.*] For a man to forfeit the money, and choose just those few hours, might be a rather fine gesture. I mean, it would show he's not dead to romance.

KATHIE. Romance? What should my Stan, married to me for eight years, want with romance? [*She moves below the table.*] I dare say a hundred pounds doesn't mean the same to you, Miss Upshott, as it would to us.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, but you're quite wrong there. [*She crosses to R. of the sideboard. With a little laugh*] I'm afraid I'm always broke.

KATHIE [*crossing to L.C.*]. That money would have bought me something—something I've been hankering after for years and years, ever since we were married.

MISS UPSHOTT. And what's that, Mrs Kemp?

KATHIE. A fitted basin in the best bedroom. It's a thing I've dreamed of, Miss Upshott: a lovely white basin with shiny taps.

MISS UPSHOTT [*with a smile*]. Oh, well, for your sake, I hope the basin wins. You're a house-proud woman, I can see.

KATHIE. I was brought up to be—I'm a Wigglesworth, I am.

MISS UPSHOTT. A—what?

KATHIE. Miss Kathie Wigglesworth, as was. North-country,

born and bred. Eat your dinner off a Wigglesworth floor you could, any day of the week.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh—er—how nice.

KATHIE [*moving up L.*]. And maybe I'd have done better if I'd stayed up North. [*She turns to MISS UPSHOTT.*] Time and again, my mother's said to me, 'If marry you must, see as he's good solid North, with plenty of backbone, and no frills and nonsense. Southerners,' she says, 'they're all alike: smarmy, two-faced, and shiftless. Loll in a chair they will, while you fetch the coal up from the cellar.'

MISS UPSHOTT. But—surely—Mr Kemp . . .

KATHIE. I've no cause to complain—so far. To-night'll show the stuff he's really made of.

[*Three sharp raps are heard on the wall R. These raps must sound as though they really are on bricks and mortar.*]

Excuse me. [*She crosses briskly to the fireplace, picks up the poker and raps twice on the wall below the fireplace. With a jerk of her head towards R.*] That was Mrs Carrie Markby, my next-door neighbour. If she wants to pop in on me she knocks three times; if convenient, I knock back twice, if not, once. [*She replaces the poker.*] You should see *her* house. A real old-fashioned pig-sty, if you like.

MISS UPSHOTT. Oh, dear.

KATHIE. Crockery piled in the sink, dust swept under the carpet. I'd go mad! Still, I'll say one thing for Carrie: she's as sluttish as they make 'em, but she's good-hearted—and that's something, these days.

MISS UPSHOTT. It's a very great deal, I think. [*She crosses to KATHIE.*] Well, thank you so very much for the little chat, Mrs Kemp. I'll get half a column out of it, at least—so don't forget to buy a copy of *Feminine Foibles* on Thursday, and read all about yourself.

KATHIE. We Wigglesworths don't go much on that sort of thing: just weddings and funerals, and once when Dad took a prize with his chrysanthemums. We're not ones for showing off.

MISS UPSHOTT. No—no, I'm sure you're not. [*She holds out her hand.*] And keep your fingers crossed about the fitted basin.

KATHIE [*shaking hands with MISS UPSHOTT*]. I'd keep my eyes crossed, if I thought it'd do any good.

MISS UPSHOTT [*with a little laugh*]. Good-bye, then. And thank you again.

KATHIE. You're welcome. Good-bye.

[MISS UPSHOTT crosses to the door. As she does so the door opens.]

CARRIE MARKBY enters. She is about the same age as KATHIE, but utterly different in manner and appearance. She is wearing a short, tight-fitting skirt, a satin blouse, a string of Woolworth pearls, and her feet are thrust into a pair of bedroom slippers. She is carrying a glossy film magazine, and is smoking a cigarette. Seeing MISS UPSHOTT, she stops abruptly.

CARRIE. Oh—pardon me. Am I butting in?

MISS UPSHOTT. Not at all. I'm just leaving.

[MISS UPSHOTT crosses below CARRIE, pauses at the door to give a little wave of the hand to KATHIE, then exits, closing the door. The sound of the front door being closed is heard.]

CARRIE. I didn't know you'd company, dear, and you did knock twice.

KATHIE [crossing to L. of the table]. I wanted to be shut of her. I thought she might be the sort as never knows when to go.

CARRIE. Whoever was she, eh?

KATHIE [replacing the chair L. of the table in its original position]. Ask no questions, Carrie Markby, and you'll hear no lies.

CARRIE. All right, dear, all right. Keep your hair on. [She moves to L. of KATHIE.] Look, I've brought something to show you. [She holds out the magazine.] This.

KATHIE [glancing at the magazine]. *Film Fans' Fancy*. Really, Carrie, how you can chuck good money away on such trash?

CARRIE. I like a bit of a read, now and then. It improves the mind, they say. [She opens the magazine.] And this one's got a picture of your Stan's new lady friend. Here's what it says. [She reads the caption.] 'The unforgettable Miss April Dawn, in her latest picture, *Will You Walk Into My Boudoir?* Hold on to your hats, boys. April's here, in England, right now.' [She thrusts the magazine into KATHIE's hand.] There you are. Help yourself to an eyeful.

KATHIE [studying the picture; holding it near, then at arm's length]. Well! Well!

CARRIE. Well, what, dear?

KATHIE [explosively]. Of all the painted-up totties I ever saw!

CARRIE. All the same, you can't say she hasn't got loads of oomph.

KATHIE. What's 'oomph'?

CARRIE. Why, sex-appeal, dear, of course.

KATHIE. I'll thank you, Carrie Markby, to keep your talk clean, while you're in this house. [*She thrusts the magazine into CARRIE'S hand.*] Here, take your rubbish.

CARRIE. I thought you'd be interested, Kathie.

KATHIE. In *that* sort of woman?

CARRIE. In the circumstances, I mean.

[*She flicks her cigarette ash on to the floor.*]

KATHIE. The circumstances are none of my making—and how many times must I ask you not to toss your dirty ash on to my clean floor?

CARRIE [*grinding the ash with her foot*]. Sorry. It's just a habit. They do say it's good for the carpet, though.

KATHIE. Not for this carpet. [*She turns, crosses, and sits abruptly in the easy-chair. After a pause*] What sort of woman can she be, anyway, to let herself be the—the prize-packet in a public competition? Just imagine.

CARRIE [*with a little laugh*]. I can't, dear, I can't even imagine myself as the booby-prize at a whist-drive. [*She moves above the table.*] And, anyway, it's all part of her job. Publicity, they call it.

KATHIE. She can have all the publicity she likes, for me—but why drag my Stan into it?

CARRIE. Oh, come on, dear, play fair. Your Stan went in for the competition of his own free will.

KATHIE. Making a fool of himself.

CARRIE. I wouldn't say that, either. After all, he won. [*She crosses and stands L. of KATHIE.*] And for all you know, he may take the hundred pounds. He hasn't said one way or the other, has he?

KATHIE. No, he hasn't. And he should have done, Carrie. There should have been no shilly-shallying. He should have said at once, 'Of course I'm taking the money.' Instead of which he just sat last night like a stuffed dummy. And off he goes this morning, still without a word.

CARRIE. P'raps he likes just—sort of—playing with the idea till the last minute.

KATHIE. A married man, with a wife and home to keep, has no right playing with ideas of *that* sort.

CARRIE [*crossing to R. of the table*]. Oh, come, dear, a man's a man for a' that, as they say. Just because he's married doesn't mean that all the other women in the world but his wife are so many dried-up blocks of wood. Not after the first year or so, anyway. 'Tisn't natural.

KATHIE. H'm! You've a queer, loose way of thinking, Carrie Markby, I must say. We figure things different up North.

CARRIE [*looking around for somewhere to drop her ash*]. Maybe that's why so many come South for their holidays.

KATHIE. Oh, aye? Blackpool's a deserted village, I suppose. [*She rises and picks up an ashtray from the mantelpiece.*] Here! For heaven's sake, use this.

[*She puts the ashtray on the table, then moves to the window.*]

CARRIE. Oh, ta, dear. [*She flicks her ash into the ashtray, then crosses slowly to L.C.*] You know, dear, I can't think what you're crabbing about. It's a million to one he'll take the money; but supposing he doesn't—I mean, supposing he should hit out for the bright lights and little Miss Dawn, what on earth does it matter?

KATHIE [*turning quickly*]. Matter? Matter?

CARRIE. Well, after all, Stan's worked hard all these years. He might feel he deserves a break.

KATHIE. And haven't I worked hard?

CARRIE. A damn sight too hard, if you ask me. You get less like a woman, and more like a patent household gadget every day. Now, no one can say that about me.

KATHIE [*dryly*]. No, they certainly can't.

CARRIE. I like ease and comfort, I do—and a bit of harmless fun, now and then. A bit of life.

KATHIE. Aye, I've noticed that. [*She moves to R. of CARRIE.*] Supposing it was your husband had won this here competition thing, I wonder how you'd feel about it, eh?

CARRIE. Well, dear, I could certainly use that hundred pounds, but if Mis [*she pronounces the s as z*] chose the other thing, I'd say good luck to him. In fact, in a way, I'd be delighted.

KATHIE. You mean——

CARRIE. I mean delighted. It'd prove I'd married a real live man, after all. There's times I've begun to doubt it lately, with Mis.

KATHIE. Mis?

CARRIE. My husband, dear. Short for 'Misery.'

KATHIE. Well, really, Carrie!

CARRIE [*moving up L.*]. When I think of him as he was before we were married. When I *think*, Kathie. As larky as they make 'em Dancing one night. Pictures the next. Never a dull moment. And look at him now.

KATHIE. A real decent chap, Carrie. Right as rain.

CARRIE. You've said it. I was caught in the rain when I married him, and I've been in the rain ever since. [*She sits on the sofa.*] Started to change on the honeymoon, he did. 'I think, in future,' he says, 'it'd be better if I called you Caroline; Carrie,' he says, 'is a bit too flighty for a married man.'

KATHIE [*moving and standing R. of the sofa*]. Come to that, I'd sooner have Caroline myself.

CARRIE. And that very same night. 'What about a little pub-crawl,' I says. 'A pint or two for you, and a nice port and lemon for me.' 'From now on,' he says, 'all that's cut out. Marriage is one thing,' he says, 'and pubs is another, and they don't mix. We'll drink in some sea air, instead.'

KATHIE [*with an approving nod*]. Very sensible.

CARRIE. And that's how it's been ever since, till there's days I feel I could scream.

KATHIE. It's maybe a pity he doesn't give you something to scream for. Or p'raps you'd like it if he got drunk and knocked you about, or—or went off chasing other women.

CARRIE. I'd hopes of that once.

KATHIE. What?

CARRIE. After we'd been married about a year it was. 'I've decided,' he says, 'to attend night school.' 'Oho,' I think to myself, 'night school, eh?' So I followed him one night, Kathie, and d'you know where he ended up?

KATHIE. No.

CARRIE [*glumly*]. Night school.

KATHIE. You mean, you'd sooner it really had been—some other woman?

CARRIE. Well—course, I'd have scratched her eyes out, because that'd be the right and proper thing to do. Only, it would have made him more—sort of—interesting, in a way—more flesh and blood, if you know what I mean.

KATHIE. No! I don't know what you mean.

CARRIE. Well—it's just that I like folk to have a bit of 'go' in them, and—and not take everything so serious. After all, we only live once, so why not get all the fun you can? I—I like a good laugh and a joke now and then—and to be where there's something doing—I've always been like that. Always. They used to call me 'Butter-fly' at home.

KATHIE. Well, you're not a butterfly now; you're a married woman, Carrie, and you'd do well to remember it.

CARRIE. I do—though that's not to say I always shall.

KATHIE. Eh?

CARRIE [*with a shrug*]. One of these days, dear—you never know—I might break loose.

KATHIE [*sharply*]. What?

CARRIE. Kick over the traces—or else bust!

KATHIE. Well, really!

CARRIE. It isn't that I haven't had my chances, either, Kathie. Only the other day, at the pictures . . .

KATHIE [*checking her; even more sharply*]. That'll do now, Carrie. I don't want to hear any more. You should be ashamed of yourself.

[CARRIE is about to speak.

[*She checks her.*] Ssh! I thought I heard back-door shut.

CARRIE [*rising*]. Your Stan, I expect. [*She moves down L.*

KATHIE. Stan always uses front, no matter how it mucks the step. Up North, we reckon back-door good enough. [*She crosses towards the door.*] I'd better just . . . [*She halts abruptly as the door opens.*

[HAROLD MARKBY enters. *He is perhaps a year or two older than CARRIE, is neatly dressed, dry in manner, and precise in speech.*

Oh—it's you, Harold.

HAROLD [*not immediately seeing CARRIE*]. Good evening, Mrs Kemp, and please accept my apologies for intruding. I thought I might find my wife here. [KATHIE, *with gesture, indicates CARRIE*. Oh, here you are, Caroline.

CARRIE [*cheerfully*]. Hullo, Mis. Your supper's in the oven. Steak-and-kidney pudding. It looked lovely when I tipped it out of the tin.

HAROLD. It would look—and taste—even lovelier if it were hot.

CARRIE. Eh?

HAROLD. And in order to heat it, Caroline, it is necessary to turn on the electric current.

CARRIE. What? You don't mean I forgot again?

HAROLD [*with one nod*]. Again, Caroline.

CARRIE [*with a laugh*]. Well, there now. Aren't I little Mrs Muddle-head? [*She moves towards the door.*] I'll go and see to it.

HAROLD [*checking her; with upraised hand*]. I myself have already performed the simple operation.

CARRIE. Oh—oh, thank you, Mis.

HAROLD [*to KATHIE*]. I saw your Stanley in the street just now, Mrs Kemp.

KATHIE [*eagerly*]. Did he—did he say anything?

HAROLD. We had no speech. He turned into Dalby's flower-shop.

CARRIE [*crossing hurriedly to L. of KATHIE*]. There now, dear. Hear that? He's plumped for the cash, and he's buying you flowers. No need to worry any more, eh?

[KATHIE looks at CARRIE for a moment without speaking, then turns and crosses to the fireplace.]

KATHIE. How do I know he isn't buying 'em to smooth me down, soft-soap me with a few choice blooms, eh?

CARRIE. Not him.

KATHIE [*sitting in the easy-chair; shaking her head*]. I'm counting no chickens, Carrie. I'd sooner wait and see.

HAROLD [*crossing to L. of KATHIE*]. I can't help feeling, Mrs Kemp, that your husband has made himself somewhat—er—conspicuous in this matter. They were full of it at the office to-day. The subject lends itself to jokes which I could not repeat.

CARRIE. Oh, come on, Mis.

HAROLD. Certainly not.

KATHIE. There's no doubt how you'd have chosen if you'd won, eh, Harold? No gallivanting round the town with an actress woman for you, eh?

HAROLD. Indeed no, Mrs Kemp. With that hundred pounds I should have purchased a second-hand *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and booked for the Political Economy Holiday Course at Broadstairs.

CARRIE. My! What an orgy!

[*She pronounces the word with a hard g.*]

HAROLD [*pronouncing it correctly*]. Orgy, Caroline. The g is soft.

CARRIE. Like a lot of other things, if you ask me.

HAROLD [*to KATHIE*]. Nor do I approve of competitions, Mrs Kemp. They are typical of the modern urge to get something for nothing.

CARRIE. There's nothing so modern about that. Goes right back to the Garden of Eden, that does.

HAROLD. What?

CARRIE. If that old serpent had said, 'These apples are six bob a pound,' it'd have been a different story, Mis.

HAROLD. And may I ask why you've taken to calling me Mis of late? It sounds extremely silly.

CARRIE. Short for 'Mistletoe,' darling—love and kisses, and all that. [*She thrusts the magazine at HAROLD.*] Look! That's her. That's April Dawn, Mis.

HAROLD [*after the merest glance*]. H'm!

CARRIE [*eagerly*]. She's on at the *Plaza* this week. Couldn't we go to-night, Mis? Couldn't we?

HAROLD. My dear Caroline, I took you to the pictures—[*he takes a small notebook from his pocket*] now, let me see—[*he finds the page*] on the fourth of last month, barely six weeks ago. Here we are: 'Seats seven shillings, coffee one shilling.' [*He replaces the notebook in his pocket.*] And I have other plans for this evening; one hour with George Bernard Shaw and the Third Programme.

CARRIE [*deflated*]. I see.

[*She drops the magazine on to the table, and moves up R.*

KATHIE. He's taking his time at the flower-shop, I must say.

HAROLD. I myself find flower-shops interesting, Mrs Kemp. The study of botany, you know.

CARRIE. You should take it up, Mis. Learn all about the bees and the flowers. You'd be surprised. [*Before he has time to speak*] Hark! That was your front-gate, Kathie.

[*KATHIE clutches the arms of her chair, half rises, then resumes her seat.*

It'll be Stan. [*She listens.*] He's letting himself in.

[*The front door is heard to close.*

Any minute now, and we'll know which way the tom-cat's jumped, eh?

KATHIE. I'll know more than that: I'll know whether I'm married to a decent, steady, foursquare chap, or whether I'm tied to a fool. It's a great moment for me, Carrie—make no mistake.

CARRIE. Ssh! He'll hear you.

[There is a brief moment of silence, during which they look expectantly towards the door.]

[STANLEY KEMP enters. He is of pleasing but quite unremarkable appearance, and is wearing a raincoat and muffler. He is also wearing a fixed smile.]

[As STANLEY enters; brightly] Hullo, Stan. How's tricks?

HAROLD. Good evening, Stanley.

STANLEY *[nodding to HAROLD and CARRIE]*. Evening, you two. *[To KATHIE]* Hullo, Kathie.

KATHIE. Hullo, Stan. What on earth are you all muffled up like that for? You starting a cold, or something?

[STANLEY, still smiling, shakes his head.]

The calendar says we're in August, not November—but maybe the calendar's wrong.

[STANLEY, still smiling and preserving what he hopes is an impressive silence, unwinds the muffler and tosses it on to the sofa. He then removes his coat, and with it hanging over his arm, and standing very erect, reveals that he is wearing a dinner-suit. There is a moment of spellbound silence.]

[She slowly rises.] So now we know.

CARRIE *[very impressed]*. My! Oh, my!

KATHIE. Oh, well. That's that.

[She moves down R. and stands with her back to the others.]

STANLEY. Well—isn't anyone going to tell me how I look? Kathie?

KATHIE *[without turning; grimly]*. I'm counting ten before I speak.

CARRIE *[crossing to R. of Stanley and stepping into the breach; rapturously]*. Super—wizard, Stan! That's the only word for it. A real society playboy, every inch. You look smashing, Stan. Smashing!

STANLEY. You think I'll pass, eh?

CARRIE. Pass? You'll flash by. *[She strokes his sleeve.]* Beautiful stuff. I wonder how you'd look, Mis, in a suit like this?

HAROLD. I'm afraid you'll have to go on wondering, Caroline.

[KATHIE turns.]

STANLEY. They let me put it on at the shop. Helped me to get into it. Tied the tie, and everything.

KATHIE. *And* saw the darns in your pants, I suppose.

CARRIE. Why worry? He looks real smart, Kathie, and you can't say he doesn't.

KATHIE. He certainly does. A real smart customer, he looks. [*She crosses and stands below the table. To STANLEY*] Of course, I know, Stan, that to folk like you and me money's no object; all the same, I'd like to know what that fancy get-up cost you to buy.

STANLEY. Just hired for the evening.

KATHIE. Is it, indeed? Well, that's a sight you'd never see; a Wigglesworth dolled up in borrowed plumage. What a Wigglesworth can't buy proper, a Wigglesworth does without. And where's the flowers you were buying just now?

STANLEY [*with a jerk of his head towards L.*]. I left them out there. They're in a little fancy box. Orchids.

CARRIE. Orchids! Fancy!

STANLEY [*placing his coat on the sofa*]. It was the girls at the office put me up to that dodge. 'When a gentleman goes out for the evening with a lady,' they said, 'he takes along a spray to pin on her corsage.'

KATHIE [*half under her breath*]. I know what I'd like to pin on her corsage.

STANLEY [*moving down L.*]. It'll help to get over the first awkward moments, you see.

CARRIE. There won't be any awkward moments. You'll be Stanley and April in no time.

KATHIE. Or maybe just Stan and Ape.

STANLEY [*quite gently*]. Now, see here, Kathie, you don't have to act so touchy, do you? I mean—you're just spoiling it all for me, dear.

KATHIE [*dryly*]. Oh, I'm sorry, Stan. I'd certainly hate to do that.

HAROLD. Your wife, Stanley, is not unnaturally a little disappointed. After all, a hundred pounds is a useful sum. No doubt she'd made plans how to spend it. You know what women are.

CARRIE [*with exaggerated eagerness*]. Oh, no, Harold. Do tell us. [*To STANLEY; nodding her head*] He's a great authority, you know.

HAROLD [*frigidly*]. I think, Caroline, that we should return now to our own home. My evening's timetable is already sadly disrupted. Good night, Mrs Kemp.

KATHIE. Good night, Harold. Enjoy your steak-and-kidney.

HAROLD. Thank you. [*He crosses to the door.*] And a good night to you, Stanley.

STANLEY. 'Night, Harold. [*HAROLD exits, leaving the door open.*]

CARRIE [*after a pause*]. Oh well—I suppose I'd better buzz off. [*She hesitates, looks at KATHIE, then crosses impulsively to her.*] Cheer up, dear. Don't let things get you down. I'll pop in again a bit later, when you're on your own, eh?

KATHIE. If you like.

CARRIE. I'll rap the usual three, so two if you want me, and one if you don't. Good enough?

KATHIE. All right.

[*CARRIE gives KATHIE a little comforting pat on the shoulder, then crosses towards the door.*]

CARRIE [*stopping and turning*]. All the same—I can't help it, Stan—I'm glad you chose the way you did. You're like me, you are; you like to see a bit of life now and then. So have a good time, and tell us all about it to-morrow. [*She crosses to the doorway.*] And if you can't be good, be careful.

[*CARRIE exits, leaving the door open. There is a short pause during which STANLEY catches KATHIE's eye, looks quickly away, gives a little cough, and eases his collar.*]

KATHIE [*presently*]. You'll not be for eating your tea, I suppose?

STANLEY. Er—no, thank you, Kathie.

KATHIE [*moving above the table*]. Then I may as well clear away.

STANLEY. Shan't you have any yourself?

KATHIE [*standing above the table and straightening the flowers in the bowl*]. I may have a bite later—before I leave for the station.

STANLEY. Before you what?

KATHIE. I'm catching the midnight from Euston. I'm going back North, Stan—and I'm stopping there.

STANLEY [*very startled; speaking as quietly as he can contrive*]. Now—now, see here, Kathie, that's no way to talk, that isn't.

KATHIE. It's my way, Stan—and what's more, I mean every word. You'd better get a daily woman in to see to things. You'll have to get your own breakfast to-morrow, if you want any—and you'll find the bicarbonate on the second shelf.

STANLEY. Kathie!

KATHIE. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've packing to see to.

[*She starts to move briskly to the doorway.*]

STANLEY [*hurriedly barring her way and controlling himself with an effort*]. Kathie, listen to me—you can't go on like this—sit down for a minute. Go on! Sit down!

KATHIE [*her voice a shade louder*]. And who, pray, are you ordering about, Stanley Kemp?

STANLEY. I'm not ordering; I'm asking—*please*.

[KATHIE looks at him for a second or two in silence, then she crosses to L. of the table, draws out the chair to face down stage, and sits, very bolt upright.]

KATHIE [*after a pause*]. Well? I'm waiting, Stanley Kemp.

STANLEY. And—and do, for heaven's sake, stop calling me Stanley Kemp. I—I don't like it.

KATHIE. You'd like it less if I called you some of the names that's on the tip of my tongue.

[STANLEY pauses a moment, then moves to L. of KATHIE, and strives to speak calmly and reasonably.]

STANLEY. Now look, Kathie, where's the sense in carrying on like this? I'm asking you, where's the sense in it?

KATHIE. And I'm asking you, where's the sense in a married man chucking away a hundred pounds, to gallivant round the town for a few hours with a—a painted-up Hollywood trollop?

STANLEY. But—but, for all you know, Kathie, she may be quite a nice young lady.

KATHIE. Lady? [*She springs up, snatches the magazine from the table and thrusts it in front of STANLEY's face.*] There she is! And if that's a lady, then I'm the Queen of Sheba—twice over.

STANLEY. Yes, but—that's the way she's dressed for her acting, Kathie.

KATHIE. You call that dressed?

STANLEY [*losing a little control*]. Oh—here, give it to me.

[*He snatches the magazine from her and tosses it on to the table.*]

KATHIE. Careful! You may want to cut that out, and have it framed in your bedroom.

[*She resumes her seat.*]

[STANLEY controls himself with an effort, moves down L., then turns to face her.]

STANLEY. Now listen, Kathie: let's both keep calm and quiet, shall we? And see if we can't get this matter straight. All I want is

to—to try to show you how I feel about all this. Will you let me have a shot at just that, Kathie?

KATHIE [*after a pause; with a nod*]. Shoot!

STANLEY [*moving a little up L.C.*]. Well—well, in the first place, you can't say I haven't been a good husband all these years, can you?

KATHIE [*after a sniff*]. On the surface, maybe.

STANLEY. And below it. I've brought my money home regular. I've given you the best I could, and I've worked the best I could, day in, day out. [*He pauses.*] And, you see, that's just it, Kathie.

KATHIE. Just what?

STANLEY. Day in, day out. Never a change. Never anything—different. A man does get a bit fed up at times and—you know—feel he'd like a bit of a break.

KATHIE. Oh?

STANLEY. Of course, I know I'm only one of millions like me; but the point is, they've never had this chance, and I have. I mean, to be able to—sort of—step into another world for a few hours, going to a swagger hotel, sitting in a box at a theatre, seeing a bit of the life we can only read about—it'll be something I'll always remember, Kathie.

KATHIE. I see. And you think that's worth a hundred pounds, do you?

STANLEY. Yes, Kathie, I do. And—and just think of all I'll have to tell you, afterwards, eh? Why, it'll be something we can talk about for years to come, you and me.

KATHIE [*rising*]. You'll have to talk pretty loud, if I'm to hear you. I'll be nearly two hundred miles away.

STANLEY [*crossing to L. of her*]. Ah, now, you don't—you can't—really mean that. Not *really*, Kathie.

[*There is a short silence during which KATHIE crosses to the fireplace.*]

KATHIE [*presently*]. The real truth is, Stan, you've been pretending with me all these years. You've never been really settled or contented, have you? No! Your own home and your own wife haven't been good enough. All the time you've been hankering after—after something different, as you call it. In fact, you've been fed up.

STANLEY. No, no.

KATHIE. You said so just now. Fed up, you said. Fed up.

STANLEY. But—I didn't mean it that way.

KATHIE. Oh, yes, you did. And after the way I've scrimped and scraped, and worked and slaved for you. Your trouble is, you haven't known when you were well off. You've never figured out which side your bread was buttered. Oh, no, not you.

STANLEY. But I have, Kathie. I know the side my bread's buttered all right. The only thing is, a man likes a bit of jam on it, now and then—like to-night.

KATHIE. From now on, Stanley Kemp, have all the jam you want. Live on jam—and see how you like it. Just wait and see.

STANLEY [*his tone hardening a little*]. I can see one thing right now; you're determined to put me in the wrong, aren't you?

KATHIE. I don't have to trouble. You've put yourself there already.

[STANLEY *is about to protest*.
[*She checks him.*] Now, don't say any more, Stan. Save your breath to cool that turtle soup to-night—[*she crosses towards the door*] and let me get on with my packing.

STANLEY [*moving to intercept her*]. Now, Kathie, listen . . .

KATHIE [*facing him very squarely*]. No, it's no use. You've had your say, and I've had mine. We both know where we stand.

STANLEY [*a shade blusteringly*]. You know—you're making a big mistake—that's what you're doing.

KATHIE [*after a quick shake of her head*]. When I made my big mistake, Stan, the organ played. Eight years ago last twenty-first of June, it was, at the parish church. *That's* when I slipped up.

[STANLEY *looks at her in silence for a moment*.

STANLEY [*slowly*]. I see. So that's how you feel, is it?

KATHIE. It is. And now you'd better wash your face and be on your way, hadn't you? It'd never do to keep your new girl friend waiting.

STANLEY. Kathie!

KATHIE. And—and see you make the most of your few hours. Have the time of your life, Stan. You'll be coming back to an empty house, remember.

[STANLEY *looks at her in silence for a moment*.

STANLEY. All right, then. If that's how you want it—all right.

[STANLEY *swings round and marches out*. KATHIE *stands quite still, like an automaton whose works have sud-*

denly run down. She closes her eyes for a second or two, then opens them and starts to move slowly towards the doorway. Just before she reaches it she notices the coat and scarf lying on the sofa. Picking up the coat, she gives it a little shake, then folds it and replaces it on the sofa. Taking the scarf, she folds it too, and places it neatly on top of the coat. As she does so a knock is heard on the front door. KATHIE gives an impatient little click of her tongue, hesitates for a moment, then exits. There is a very brief pause.

KATHIE [off]. Oh, will you come in?

[MRS PRESCOTT enters. KATHIE follows her on. MRS PRESCOTT is in her mid-fifties, and is a somewhat formidable-looking female, blunt both of manner and speech. She has never minced a word in her life, and would make no bones about telling you so. She is, of course, wearing outdoor clothes, of the cut and appearance described as 'matronly.' She carries a handbag.]

MRS PRESCOTT [as she enters]. Any more of that fellow's sauce—[she puts some coins into her bag] and I'd have given him in charge. And serve him right if I had. Sixpence is enough for any taxi-man. [She snaps her bag to, advances a little farther, then pauses and looks around the room.] M'm! It's a cosy little place you've got here, Mrs Kemp, I must say. You do all the work yourself?

KATHIE. I—have done—so far.

MRS PRESCOTT. I thought so much. No hired woman'd ever get that polish on that table. They don't stock that brand of elbow-grease these days. Your curtains, too—you send to the laundry?

KATHIE. I do 'em myself, Mrs . . . ?

MRS PRESCOTT. Prescott's the name. [She looks at KATHIE.] I'll say one thing for you, anyway, young woman, you've got the right ideas. However, it's not you I've trekked out here to meet. You've got a husband, I think—eh?

KATHIE. Stan?

MRS PRESCOTT. That's him, Stanley Kemp. That's the gentleman I'd like to take a look at, if you please.

KATHIE. I—I'm afraid you can't, Mrs Prescott. He's upstairs.

MRS PRESCOTT. Bedridden?

KATHIE. Why, no, of course not, he's—

MRS PRESCOTT. Then I'll wait till he comes down.

KATHIE. But—he's going out.

MRS PRESCOTT. I know he is. And not to the Y.M.C.A. neither. Oh, no! He's going out on the spree. That's what your husband's going out on, Mrs Kemp. The spree. [*She sniffs.*] Or so he thinks.

KATHIE [*with a shrug; stiffly*]. I suppose that's his affair, Mrs Prescott.

MRS PRESCOTT. And mine, Mrs Kemp. *And* mine. Rip-roaring round the town till all hours. And me always in bed by ten. What d'you suppose I'll feel like to-morrow, eh?

KATHIE [*staring*]. You? Why should you feel anything at all?

MRS PRESCOTT. I won't. That's just it. I'll be numb from head to foot. Do me out of my sleep, Mrs Kemp, and I'm a wreck.

KATHIE. But—but . . .

MRS PRESCOTT. And not as if I could have a lay-in in the morning, to make up. Not me. Rain or shine, eight o'clock sharp sees me at that dratted studio place—and don't I know what my poor feet'll be like. Agony! Oh, I know what I'm in for all right.

KATHIE. But Stan's not going out with—you?

MRS PRESCOTT [*grimly*]. Oh, yes, he is. He doesn't know it yet, and he mayn't altogether like the idea when he does—but he's certainly going out with me, Mrs Kemp.

KATHIE [*moving close to MRS PRESCOTT and staring at her*]. Yes, but—look here—you're not April Dawn. You couldn't be.

MRS PRESCOTT [*looking very squarely at her*]. There is no April Dawn.

KATHIE. Eh?

MRS PRESCOTT. Not really. Winnie Prescott is the name. But what was good enough for the parson at the font wasn't fancy enough for that Hollywood lot. [*KATHIE looks bewildered.*]

I don't allow my daughter to spend half the night on her own with a strange married man—or unmarried either, come to that. Film star she may be, but I'll see she keeps respectable. Wherever my daughter goes her mother goes too. Let there be no humming and hah-ing about that: her mother goes too.

KATHIE [*almost speechless*]. You mean . . . ? [*She breaks off, stares at MRS PRESCOTT for a moment, then crosses hurriedly above the table, snatches up the magazine, and displays the picture.*] You mean—you're her mother?

MRS PRESCOTT [*with a nod*]. If you look in the right-hand corner you'll see a bit of a smudge. It's the shadow cast from where I was standing. Oh, yes. I was there, too. You mind if I sit for a minute?

[KATHIE, *trying to marshal her thoughts, moves to R. of the table.*

KATHIE. Oh—yes, do—please.

[*She glances quickly from the picture to MRS PRESCOTT, then back to the picture.*

MRS PRESCOTT [*sitting L. of the table*]. And if you're searching for a likeness you're too late. Time was when she'd my nose, my ears, and her father's hair, but Hollywood changed all that. Grooming, they called it. And when they'd got their hands off her I hardly knew her for my own, and her father said he wasn't so sure as he wanted to.

[*There is a very short pause. The magazine slips from KATHIE's fingers to the table. She turns, crosses rather slowly to the fireplace, then faces MRS PRESCOTT.*

KATHIE. But you—you're not—I mean, you don't speak American.

MRS PRESCOTT. And me English as John Bull's Aunt Fanny? Thirty years in the States doesn't mean I've got to talk their lingo, I should hope. Plain English is good enough, thank you.

[*There is a slight pause as KATHIE moves down R., still trying to grasp the situation.*

KATHIE. And—and another thing, Mrs Prescott . . .

MRS PRESCOTT. Out with it.

KATHIE. If you're—all that fussy about your daughter, I'm surprised you ever let her figure in this competition thing. Cheap, I call it.

MRS PRESCOTT. I'm surprised at myself. 'What?' I said. 'Throw my daughter open to the public, like that?' I said. But in the end they talked me over. 'Good publicity,' they said. 'And after all,' they said, 'the winner's sure to take the money. Who wouldn't?'

KATHIE [*dryly*]. My Stan wouldn't.

MRS PRESCOTT. So it seems. [*She leans forward in her chair.*] Is he—is he *that* sort of man? What in America they call—a wolf? You know what I mean.

KATHIE [*not looking at MRS PRESCOTT*]. If you'd asked me that

yesterday, I'd have said no. To-day, I just don't—[*She breaks off and crosses to R.C.*] he *said*—he just wanted a break.

MRS PRESCOTT. Oh, did he, indeed? If *my* husband told me he wanted a break I'd give him one—where the chicken got the chopper. *You'd* have found the money pretty useful, I dare say—eh?

KATHIE. It'd have given me a thing I've always longed for, Mrs Prescott: a fitted basin—just one, you know, in the best bedroom. With shiny taps.

MRS PRESCOTT. They're solid silver at our house on Beverley Hills. Now there's a house for you. Early Spanish style, they call it—and all so cosy and homey you feel you've got shut in Selfridges after closing time.

[*KATHIE crosses to L., then turns and looks at MRS PRESCOTT.*]

KATHIE. You know—you're not a bit like what I thought a film star's mother would be.

MRS PRESCOTT. Looking after our Winnie leaves me no time to waste in beauty parlours. Speaking of time, how much longer is that man of yours going to be?

KATHIE. I'll—p'raps I'd better give him a shout, eh?

MRS PRESCOTT. Tell him there's a string of dancing girls in the parlour. That'll fetch him, if he's the kind I suspect. [*She rises.*]

[*KATHIE exits.*]

KATHIE [*off; calling*]. Stan! Stan! You'd better come down. There's a lady to see you. Look sharp.

[*KATHIE enters and stands L. of MRS PRESCOTT.*]

MRS PRESCOTT. Course, our Winnie didn't want me to come. 'Silly,' she said. 'Not half so silly,' I said, 'as a fellow chucking away a hundred, to spend a few hours with you. After all the awful things you read in the Sunday papers,' I said, 'I want to know what we're tackling, and the best way to find out is to catch him in his own home. That's the place to size a man up,' I said. So here I am.

[*STANLEY enters. Seeing MRS PRESCOTT, he pauses in the doorway.*]

KATHIE. And here's Stan.

MRS PRESCOTT [*her head tilted back, as she takes in the picture formed by STANLEY in the doorway*]. H'm! Got all his fine feathers on, too. My word, but he doesn't half look a toff, eh?

KATHIE. They're not his, really. Just rented for the night, you know.

STANLEY [*advancing a step or two; protestingly*]. Kathie!

KATHIE [*indicating MRS PRESCOTT*]. Oh, but you don't know who this lady is, do you, Stan? I wonder, now, if you can guess.

STANLEY [*after studying MRS PRESCOTT for a moment*]. Is it—it's your Auntie Lily, from Derby, isn't it?

KATHIE [*after a short, dry laugh*]. Auntie Lily, indeed! [*To MRS PRESCOTT*] And her the family scarecrow. [*To STANLEY*] This, Stan, *this* is the mother of—Miss April Dawn. There, now.

STANLEY [*blankly*]. Oh—er—yes?

KATHIE. Yes, Stan. And wherever Miss Dawn goes—her mother goes, too. [*To MRS PRESCOTT*] Isn't that so?

MRS PRESCOTT. It certainly is. I hope you don't mind, Mr Kemp, but such is my rule—and those that don't like it can lump it.

KATHIE. Of course he doesn't mind. He's delighted—aren't you, Stan? The more the merrier, and all that, eh?

STANLEY [*weakly*]. Yes—yes, of course.

MRS PRESCOTT. Then quick march, Mr Kemp. You get your things on, and let's be off. We can get better acquainted later.

STANLEY. Er—er . . .

MRS PRESCOTT. Yes? What's on your mind, Mr Kemp?

STANLEY [*after a pause*]. Nothing.

MRS PRESCOTT. Good! [*STANLEY moves dazedly to the sofa.*]

KATHIE [*bustling to the sideboard*]. And now, Mrs Prescott, won't you have a glass of wine before you go? Now do. It's port—from last Christmas.

MRS PRESCOTT. Not for me, Mrs Kemp. I never touch. Neither does my daughter. [*To STANLEY*] I'll ask you to take note of that, Mr Kemp. No wine to-night. [*To KATHIE*] Signed the pledge I did, when I was a child, and living up Warrington way.

KATHIE [*pouncing on this*]. Warrington? [*She takes a step towards MRS PRESCOTT.*] You don't mean—you're Lancashire?

MRS PRESCOTT [*in broad Lancashire dialect*]. Aye, lass, but I am an' all. [*In her normal speech*] Through and through. Clogs and shawls are our family crest, and 'No Nonsense' is the motto. [*To STANLEY*] Just take note of that, too, will you? [*To KATHIE*] Lived in good old Warrington for generations back, my family has.

KATHIE [*excitedly*]. Mine, too. Lived there for years, we have.

MRS PRESCOTT. What? Never!

[*STANLEY, during the following, with the slow, almost dream-*

like movements of a diver on the bed of the sea, takes the scarf from the sofa, and hangs it limply around his neck, staring dazedly all the time at MRS PRESCOTT.

KATHIE [*crossing to L. of MRS PRESCOTT*]. Eighteen, Runcorn Road is where I was born, and Wigglesworth was the name.

MRS PRESCOTT. Then—then your mother'd be a Sparkes. Amy Sparkes!

KATHIE. That's her! That's her! Amy Sparkes.

MRS PRESCOTT. Well, of all the . . . Why, your mother and me were at school together. Like sisters, we were.

KATHIE. You're not—you're never Sally Hobson?

MRS PRESCOTT. As was! That's me!

KATHIE [*breathlessly*]. That married Sam Prescott, and went to America. Why, Mother's always on about you. Sally Hobson this, and Sally Hobson that.

MRS PRESCOTT. I often think of Amy Sparkes, too, and the rare old times we had together. Those were the days, and no mistake.

KATHIE. And—and the Sparkeses and the Hobsons are distantly related. You know: your-cat-ran-up-our-entry sort of thing.

MRS PRESCOTT. That's right. My old Auntie Sarah married—let's see, now . . .

KATHIE. Was my mother's cousin's third wife. That's it. [*To STANLEY, excitedly*] Stan! Stan! Hear that? This lady and me are related. Did you *ever* in *all* your *life*!

STANLEY [*slowly shaking his head*]. No—no, Kathie, never.

[*He sinks down upon the sofa, the scarf dangling loosely around his neck.*]

MRS PRESCOTT. I'm not the kissing sort as a rule, but— [*she kisses KATHIE*] that's from me to your mother, love.

KATHIE. And one from her to her old friend, Sally.

[*She kisses MRS PRESCOTT.*]

MRS PRESCOTT [*moving down c.*]. You know we'll have to do something about this. [*To STANLEY*] Mr Kemp, why not be sensible, forget to-night's jamboree and grab the money instead? It's not too late. You leave it to me. And you and your wife come with me to our hotel, and we'll all spend a quiet family evening together. [*To KATHIE*] Eh, lover? Sam'll just love to meet Amy Sparkes's daughter.

KATHIE. Why—I'd love to—but . . .

MRS PRESCOTT. And I tell you what; we'll have fish and chips, for old time's sake. Well? What about it?

KATHIE. It's a grand idea, but—[*she looks at STANLEY*] it's for Stan to say.

[*There is a short silence. STANLEY looks at MRS PRESCOTT, then quickly away.*]

STANLEY. Just—arrange it among yourselves.

MRS PRESCOTT [*to KATHIE*]. There, now. You see. He's all for it.

KATHIE [*crossing hurriedly to the door*]. I'll just pop my hat on. Won't be a sec.

[*KATHIE exits. There is a short pause. MRS PRESCOTT looks at STANLEY, then moves nearer to him. STANLEY is not looking at her, but directly in front.*]

MRS PRESCOTT [*after a little cough*]. You know, Mr Kemp, I think you've acted very right and proper, deciding the way you have.

[*STANLEY, looking directly ahead, makes no reply.*]
After all, what should a man like you want with theatres and film stars and night clubs, and you with a good home and a wife in a million? You chose the right sort when you picked a Wigglesworth.

[*STANLEY stirs slightly, but still makes no reply.*]
This time to-morrow you'll be glad things turned out like they did. Brass is brass, Mr Kemp, and a hundred pounds is better than a sick headache any day. You'll like my Sam, too. Get him to take off some of them film stars, and he'll have you splitting your sides. You're going to enjoy the evening, Mr Kemp.

[*STANLEY looks at MRS PRESCOTT and shakes his head.*]
What?

STANLEY [*rising*]. I'm staying at home. I'm getting out of these things, and—and I'll do a bit of gardening.

MRS PRESCOTT. But you can do that any day.

STANLEY. Any day and every day—including this one.

[*MRS PRESCOTT is about to speak.*]
[*Firmly*] It's no use. My mind's made up. I'm staying at home.

[*KATHIE enters briskly. She wears her hat and carries her gloves.*]

MRS PRESCOTT. Just listen to this, love: your husband's turned pig-headed. All for stopping at home, he is.

KATHIE. Why, Stan, whatever's come over you?

STANLEY. Nothing's come over me. I just feel like a session in the garden, that's all.

KATHIE [*accepting this quite unconcernedly*]. Oh, well—of course—if you'd rather. [*She puts on her gloves.*] Everything's laid on the kitchen table. You've only to mash the tea. [*To MRS PRESCOTT*] I've been thinking: those fancy coloured ones are all right, but I'd sooner have plain white, wouldn't you? Fitted basins, I mean.

MRS PRESCOTT. White every time, love.

KATHIE. Course, the coloured ones don't show the dirt, but dirt's dirt, and if a thing's dirty I like it to look dirty, and then I can get down to it.

MRS PRESCOTT. Same here. I'm always chasing dirt. [*She moves to STANLEY and holds out her hand.*] Well, bye-bye, Mr Kemp, and see you again soon. I'll often be popping in, you know.

STANLEY [*shaking hands*]. That'll be nice.

[*MRS PRESCOTT crosses towards the door. As she does so, three sharp raps are heard on the wall* R. MRS PRESCOTT, startled, stops and turns.

KATHIE. It's nothing. Only my neighbour, Carrie Markby. [*To STANLEY.*] Give her a rap, will you, Stan? Just one for 'No.' [*To MRS PRESCOTT*] Aye, and a real flighty one she is too, that Carrie. [*She turns to go.*] Take a look at her curtains as we go out. Like rags. Bye-bye, Stan, and don't tread dirt in from the garden. [*To MRS PRESCOTT, as they go out*] Always hankering after excitement, is Carrie.

[*MRS PRESCOTT and KATHIE exit.* [*Off*]] But then, you see, she's a Southerner. Oh, aye, she's a Londoner, that one, and no mistake.

[*The slam of the front door cuts off the sound of KATHIE's voice. STANLEY does not move. With the defeated air of a traveller who finds himself stranded at midnight on a branch-line railway station, he gazes dejectedly towards the open doorway. Then, still gazing, he starts to slowly remove the dangling scarf from around his neck, moving towards the sofa as he does so. Three more raps, rather louder than before, are heard. He looks over his shoulder towards R., drops the scarf on to the sofa, pauses, then with a sudden purposeful air, crosses to the fire place, takes the poker, and raps twice. This done he replaces the poker, crosses briskly to the*

sideboard, pours out two glasses of wine, takes them to the table, and places them on it. Then he moves above the table, turns, and faces L. Taking a cigarette-case and lighter from his pocket, he selects a cigarette and lights it. He stands smoking, and looking expectantly towards the open doorway, as—
the CURTAIN falls.

Home is the Hunted

By R. F. Delderfield

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CHARACTERS

(in the order of their appearance)

MAIMIE SOPWORTH, *Oscar's daughter*

ADA SOPWORTH, *Oscar's wife*

CORA SAFARELLI, *Oscar's sister*

EMMA SOPWORTH, *Oscar's mother*

OSCAR SOPWORTH

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT WILTON

The action of the play passes in the parlour behind the Sopworths' small general shop off Jamaica Road, London, S.E.

TIME: the present.

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

Home is the Hunted

SCENE: *The parlour behind the Sopworths' small general shop off Jamaica Road, London, S.E.*

The room is seedy, but not depressingly so. It has an air of having been used by a noisy, boisterous family for generations. There is a practical sash-type window L. giving access to an alley, the opposite wall of which, a few feet away, affects the amount of daylight that can penetrate the room. There is a door with a frosted glass panel C. of the back wall leading to the shop. A door down R. leads to the back entrance and other parts of the house. The fireplace is R. The furniture is plain and battered. There is a worn armchair down R. and a couch stands at an angle close to the fireplace and slightly above it. A small occasional table stands R. of the head of the couch. The fireplace is guarded by a large wire guard. In the corner up R. there is a small table with a radio receiver on it. A dresser stands L. of the door up C. and there is a tall plywood cupboard down L. A kitchen table with three chairs stands L.C. There is a telephone attached to the wall above the window. A calendar and pictures decorate the walls, and there are china dog ornaments on the mantelpiece. At night the room is lit by a single lamp-shaded pendant hanging C. with the switch L. of the door up C.

When the curtain rises it is nearly midday. The remains of breakfast for four are still on the table. A cheerful fire burns in the grate. The radio is going full blast, playing 'Tiger Rag.' MAIMIE SOPWORTH is standing at the dresser up L., making up. She has her handbag mirror propped up in front of her and has recently varnished her nails, so she holds her fingers awkwardly. She is a pert young modern aged twenty-two, and wears cheap, smart clothes. She jiggles half-consciously to the rhythm of the music. ADA SOPWORTH enters down R. She is a stocky, determined woman aged about forty-five. She has a harsh voice that just carries above the music. She carries a tray. The shop bell rings off.

ADA [*bustling to the table*]. Shop!

MAIMIE. What?

ADA [*glaring at MAIMIE*]. Shop! [*She indicates the radio.*] Turn that row off, can't you?

MAIMIE [*with an explanatory stretch of her fingers*]. Me nails. I just done 'em.

[*ADA thumps the tray on to the table, crosses to the radio and switches it off.*]

ADA. You make me tired, reely, Maimie. 'Ow do you reckon I can do everything? [*She crosses and stands above the table.*] Nails! Make-up! That awful row goin' on hour after hour. Now get on into the shop and serve before I fetch you one you won't forget in a hurry.

MAIMIE [*protestingly*]. Aw, Mum . . .

ADA. Go on, and it wouldn't have killed you to have washed up for me, would it?

MAIMIE. Why should I?

[*CORA SAFARELLI, ADA'S sister-in-law, enters down R. She is a lean, stringy, depressed woman aged about forty. Her speech and movements are slow. She is concentrating on a folded newspaper and a football coupon.*]

[*She points to CORA.*] Why can't she?

[*MAIMIE exits sulkily up C. ADA clatters some of the dirty breakfast things on to the tray. CORA drifts to the couch.*]

ADA. Yes, you're as bad, Cora. How long 'ave I got to put up with this? That's what I'd like to know. Waitin' on every one 'and, foot, an' finger. It makes me savage, I can tell you. Might as well get stuck with a lot o' parralitic invalids.

[*CORA sits on the couch.*]

Get off that couch an' take this lot out to the sink.

[*She picks up the tray and crosses to the couch.*]

CORA. I'm doin' me coupons.

ADA. I don't care if you're making your will. [*She thrusts the tray towards CORA.*] Take 'old.

CORA [*putting the newspaper and coupon on the table R. of the couch*]. What's up with you this morning? [*She rises.*] Got outer bed the wrong side?

[*She takes the tray from ADA.*]

ADA. Whichever side I got out it was more'n an hour before you,

Cora, or that slut of a daughter o' mine, an' don't none of you forget it.

[CORA drifts to the door down R.

I know one thing, though, I'm putting a stop to it, an' pretty quick too. If you think I'm nursing the whole lot of you while Oscar's beginning his stretch, an' young Ernie's finishing 'is, you're mistaken, and that's a fact.

[CORA exits with the tray down R.

[EMMA SOPWORTH, ADA's mother-in-law, enters down R.

She enjoys her old age and infirmities, and is gloomily certain that she will not last the winter. Actually she is a tough old soul, and does not need the rubber-tipped stick she uses. She carries a hot-water bottle.

EMMA [to the departing CORA]. Look where you're going, Cora, look where you're going.

[She totters slowly to the couch.

[ADA shakes up the cushion on the couch.

Not a wink last night, Ada, not one wink I didn't. [She sits on the couch.] It was me wrist the night before last, and me elbow the night before that. Last night it was me—[a twinge grips her] ahhhh—shoulder. Fair killin' me it is, Ada, you wouldn't believe, reely you wouldn't.

ADA. Oh, yes, I would. Don't forget, I've 'ad a lifetime to get used to it all.

EMMA [alarmed]. Don't say you started gettin' 'em, Ada. They don't run in your fam'ly, do they?

ADA. They might as well—I've 'ad 'em second'and ever since you parked yourself on us.

[EMMA settles herself in the corner of the couch.

Now, if you're gonner sit there all day, get your legs up so as I don't trip over 'em every time I want to get to the fire. Go on—up with 'em.

[She jerks EMMA's legs on to the couch.

EMMA [screaming with agony]. Careful! Careful! [She relaxes and leans back.] Well, I might know better'n to look for sympathy from me own daughter-in-law, that I might. I've resigned myself to bein' pushed into the background now my poor Oscar's been taken from me. Dreamin' about 'im all night, I was.

ADA [crossing to the table]. I thought you said you never slept a wink?

EMMA [blandly]. Nor I didn't—it was one o' them waking dreams.

ADA. Well, don't you waste your time dreaming, Mother, you just buckle to an' pray the judge lets 'im down lightly when he

comes up, because I'll tell you this free an' for nothing—if Oscar collects more than eighteen months, this time *I* won't be here when he comes out.

EMMA. Ada! 'Ow could you?

ADA. No, I'll be over at Ilford running that boarding-house with my sister, and seeing something back for all the hours slaving I put in.

[MAIMIE *puts her head round the door up c.*

MAIMIE. Do we stock Peabody's Satisfying Soup Powders?

ADA. No.

MAIMIE. That's what I told him.

[MAIMIE *withdraws her head and closes the door.*

ADA. It's like I was saying, Mother, if on'y you'd make the effort . . .

EMMA. Effort! Wi' me hardly able to drag meself about?

ADA. I said if you'd on'y make the . . .

[*The telephone rings.*

[CORA *enters down R. She carries an empty tray.*

See who that is, Cora.

CORA [*crossing and putting the tray on the table*]. Have I got to do everything around here?

[*She crosses to the telephone and lifts the receiver.*

ADA. No, just the odd jobs, it's all you c'n be trusted with. [*To EMMA*] Now, lissen to me, Mother. With Oscar and Ernie both doing a stretch, I can't be expected to carry the whole family on my shoulders.

CORA [*into the telephone*]. 'Oo? . . . Well, speak up, can't you? I can't hear a word . . .

EMMA. I won't say I didn't *know* it would happen, because I did. I knew soon as they took my poor Oscar I'd 'ave yet another cross to bear, tryin' and tryin', in my state of health, to keep something together for him to come 'ome to.

ADA. You never kept anything together but the clothes you stand up in, and even then you're too bone idle to use anything but safety pins.

EMMA [*spiritedly*]. Oooo! 'Ark at 'er! Just 'ark at 'er, Cora!

CORA [*to EMMA*]. Oh, shut up, can't you? 'Ow do you reckon I c'n hear what he's saying with you going on at one another?

EMMA. What who's saying?

CORA. That's what I'm trying to find out.

ADA. All right, all right. I'll take it. [*She crosses to CORA.*] I mighter known you couldn't absorb so much as a phone call, Cora.

[*She takes the receiver from CORA.*]

[*MAIMIE puts her head round the door up C.*]

MAIMIE. Have we got any more o' that scum-proof washing powder—the *blue* packets with the picture of the coal miner on 'em?

ADA. Heaven preserve me! Top shelf, over against the window. [*Into the telephone*] 'Oooo? . . . Syd! . . .

[*Her expression hardens, and she becomes tense.*]

[*MAIMIE withdraws her head and closes the door. ADA's alert attitude communicates itself to CORA and EMMA.*]

When? . . . But he won't be so daft as all that, will he? . . . Well, I don't know, it's up to 'im, isn't it? . . . Yes, o' course we will. What do you take us for? . . . All right, thanks, Syd. . . . Yes, I'll get word to you if he does show up, o' course I will. [*She replaces the receiver and turns dramatically.*] Oscar's loose!

CORA. Loose?

ADA [*crossing to R. of the table*]. Ten minutes ago.

EMMA. You mean—they couldn't prove nothing?

ADA. Prove nothing? Are you off your 'ead? He got two years.

CORA [*moving above the table*]. Then how . . . ?

ADA. He bolted as they were putting him into the van. Can you beat that? Even the police can't be relied on to do a good day's work nowadays.

EMMA. Was that Syd Awkwright phoning?

ADA. Yes. He was in court an' saw it all.

CORA. But Oscar won't come here, surely he won't come here.

ADA. Syd says he might.

CORA. But it's the first place they'll look for him.

ADA. Syd's not so sure—he says we were at the old address when they nabbed him.

EMMA. But you don't reckon they 'aven't got this address at the Yard, do you? Why, anyone wi' Oscar's record . . .

ADA. 'Course they got it, but they'll have to check it, won't they? Syd says they'll go straight to number twelve, Birch Villas, and it'll take 'em another twenty minutes or so to check on our move and come over here.

[*CORA crosses down R.*]

Where you off to?

CORA. I dunno, but out o' this frying-pan, fast as I can make it.

ADA [*moving quickly between CORA and the door down R.*]. Oh, no, you don't. You'll stay here and help. I don't know how, but you'll help, same as we've helped you since that dim-witted Eyetie 'usband of yours got himself nabbed with four hacksaws in his pocket.

[*She pushes CORA into the armchair down R.*

CORA. It's not fair—it's not my business. Oscar's your husband.

ADA [*crossing to C.*]. He's your brother, or so I've always believed, though I don't know so much now I come to look at you. My Oscar, he's not what you'd call brainy, but up against you 'e looks like the *What's My Line* panel rolled into one. Now lissen, an' you too, Mother. We got to think fast, and act fast. Change o' clothes, money from the till. [*She moves to the door up C.*] We'd better get Maimie in right away. [*She opens the door and calls.*] Maimie, empty the till and shut the shop.

MAIMIE [*off; calling*]. Shut the shop?

ADA. Lock it. Put up the 'Closed for stocktaking' notice. Go on, move to it. [*She closes the door and moves C.*] Cora! Upstairs to my room and fish those corduroys, jacket, and trilby out o' the chest o' drawers.

CORA [*rising*]. But they're Giuseppe's togs.

ADA. So what? He hasn't been near us for two years, has he?

CORA. But he might call for them any time.

ADA. Oh, don't talk so stupid. He finished his stretch last Easter, and we'll never see him any more. Go on, and bring in them gum-boots from the wash-house on your way down.

CORA [*tearfully*]. I must be clean off me head living here, clean off me head, that's what I am.

[*CORA exits down R.*

ADA. Now, if he comes at all, he'll come across Morton's timber yard and over the wall through that window.

[*She crosses to the window, opens the lower sash a few inches, then closes the curtains.*

[*MAIMIE enters up C. She carries a handful of coins which she puts on the dresser.*

Switch on the light, Maimie.

[*MAIMIE switches on the light by the switch L. of the door up C.*

MAIMIE. What's all the panic in aid of?

EMMA. Your dad's poppin' in.

MAIMIE [*crossing to L. of the couch*]. Dad? Wot—here?

ADA [*crossing to R. of the table*]. He's loose. We just heard.

MAIMIE. You mean—he made a run for it?

ADA [*heavily*]. No, they're sending him over in the Commissioner's gold-plated Rolls Royce.

MAIMIE. Well, I don't know!

ADA. You soon will. You'd better phone your Bert and make a date somewhere.

MAIMIE. Bert? What's my Bert got to do with it?

ADA. Plenty, but he don't know it yet. He'll have to look after Oscar over at his place until we can make some sort o' plan.

MAIMIE. But Bert's on probation.

ADA. That's right, and this is his chance to prove it.

MAIMIE. But it's daft—they got tabs on Bert—he'd be far better to go to Uncle Arthur's at Sidcup.

EMMA. How's he gonner get there? On a magic carpet?

MAIMIE. But Bert's so absent-minded. You couldn't get him on a job like this. Why, don't you remember that time he left all his gelignite in the Gas Company office at Balham?

EMMA. The girl's right. I wouldn't trust that feller of hers to hide a cold in the head; he's not all that honest, either—I wouldn't put it past him to tip off the police.

MAIMIE [*angrily*]. Don't you dare say things like that, Grannie. Bert's as honest an' straightforward as any burglar in London—it's on'y that he's so forgetful.

EMMA [*firmly*]. Here. That's where he'll be safest. Right here in this house, under their noses, an' where *I* can look after him.

ADA. Where *you* can look after him! That's a good one, that is. Why he'd never have been nabbed at all if you hadn't been so mean and greedy over the price he was offered for them rings he was selling for you.

EMMA [*spiritedly*]. Don't you try and blame me for what happened to Oscar. It was your fault tellin' such a soppy story to the police when they called on us. If you'd listened to me . . .

MAIMIE. Oh, pipe down, pipe down, both of you. We got no time to argue.

[CORA enters down R. She carries a pair of trousers, a jacket, a trilby hat, and a pair of gum-boots.]

ADA. Now you lissen to me, all of you. Oscar's my husband, and

ADA [*moving quickly between CORA and the door down R.*]. Oh, no, you don't. You'll stay here and help. I don't know how, but you'll help, same as we've helped you since that dim-witted Eyetie 'usband of yours got himself nabbed with four hacksaws in his pocket.

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MAIMIE. Oh, pipe down, pipe down, both of you. We got no time to argue.

[CORA enters down R. She carries a pair of trousers, a jacket, a trilby hat, and a pair of gum-boots.]

ADA. Now you lissen to me, all of you. Oscar's my husband, and

it's him that's in trouble. [*She moves above the table.*] You all of you sponge on him when he's out, and you'll all turn to lend a hand now he needs us.

[*There is a faint rap on the window.*]

[*She crosses quickly to the window.*] He's here.

[*She opens the curtains and raises the sash.*]

[OSCAR SOPWORTH *climbs over the sill and falls into the room. He is a thick-set, cheerful Cockney, aged about forty-five. He is very much out of breath.*]

Oscar!

CORA

MAIMIE

EMMA

} (*together*) { Oscar!
Dad!
Oh, me poor boy!

[*She rises.*]

[*ADA quickly shuts the window, locks it and pulls the curtains. CORA crosses and puts the clothes on the chair R. of the table.*]

OSCAR [*rising and staggering to the chair L. of the table*]. Lumme! [*He sits.*] I made it. Phew! I don't reckon I moved so fast since I fell right into a copper's lap from a second floor window-sill.

[*He puts his hat on the table.*]

CORA. They'll be here, they'll be here.

ADA [*crossing to L. of OSCAR*]. Oh, 'old your tongue an' let him get his breath back.

MAIMIE [*moving above the table*]. Could you do with a cup o' tea, Dad?

[*EMMA crosses above the table to the cupboard down L.*]

OSCAR [*horrified*]. Tea! I run 'alf-way across London with the perishin' police cars behind me, and you ast me if I could do with some tea.

[*EMMA takes a bottle of beer from the cupboard down L.*]

Why don't you offer me a packet of acid drops an' be done with it?

[*EMMA crosses to the table.*]

Now, *that's* more like it, Mum.

ADA. Get him a glass, Maimie.

OSCAR. Never mind the trimmings—[*he indicates a used cup*] pour it in that, Mum.

[*EMMA fills the cup with beer, puts the bottle on the table, then crosses to the couch and sits on the down-stage end of it.*]

Cor strewth! I'm givin' up smokin' when I get out o' this little lot. [*He picks up the cup.*] Thanks, Mum. [*He drinks greedily.*] Did Syd tip you off?

ADA. Five minutes ago.

OSCAR. Good boy. Thought he would. Saw him in court. Cor lumme! It was as easy as fallin' off a log. These young coppers they're gettin' nowadays—they ain't got a clue, not a clue, they ain't. Just walked be'ind me like they was escortin' royalty on a tour of Ol' Bailey. [*Indignantly*] Makes me fair sick, it does. I don't know who's responsible for their trainin'. Waste o' perishin' Government money, that's what it is.

ADA. Never mind that now—the point is, what are you going to do? Where are you goin'? What's for the best, Oscar?

OSCAR [*thoughtfully*]. Well, I dunno—that's fer you lot to figger out. You don't reckon I 'ave, do yer? I've 'ad other things to think about last twenty minutes.

CORA [*indicating the clothes*]. We got a change o' clothes. Here, they're Giuseppe's.

[OSCAR puts his cap on the table, rises, crosses to the clothes, and holds up the jacket.]

OSCAR. Lumme—they look it.

CORA. Well, if you don't want 'em . . .

OSCAR. All right, all right, they'll do to start with.

[*He puts the jacket on the table, removes his own jacket, then puts the corduroy trousers on over his own.*]

MAIMIE [*moving to the dresser*]. And here's the change money from the till. [*She picks up the coins.*] There's nine and ninepence there.

[*She crosses to Oscar and hands him the coins.*]

EMMA. Nine and ninepence! He'll get ter Orstralia an' back on that, I know.

[OSCAR pockets the coins.]

ADA. Oh, don't be so stupid, Mum—we'll all have to chip in with anything we can spare. [*To OSCAR*] I was just askin' Maimie to contact her Bert. He's got a quiet little lodge at Walthamstow . . .

MAIMIE. It's no good, Dad—Bert's on probation.

EMMA. *Here.* That's where you'll stay for the time being—right here in this house, down there in the cellar between the packin' cases.

OSCAR [*dismayed*]. Between packin' cases?

[*He sits on the chair R. of the table and changes his boots.*]

ADA. Oh, why don't you use your head, Mum? It's the first place they'd look for him. At Bert's place in Walthamstow . . .

CORA [*crossing down R.; tearfully*]. Anywhere, anywhere out of

here, that's all I ask. If my Giuseppe was to show up, and got so much as a glimpse of Oscar, he'd stay away for the rest of 'is life.

ADA. Why don't you stop drivelling about your Giuseppe, Cora? You know as well as I do that he's never going to show up any more, and, looking at you, I can't say I blame him.

[OSCAR rises and puts on Giuseppe's jacket.

CORA. Lissen to 'er—she's always running him down. If on'y he'd come back I'd . . .

OSCAR [*pacifically*]. Now half a tick, half a tick.

MAIMIE. Don't lissen to 'em, Dad. Give me those old togs and go straight out the back and over to Uncle Arthur's at Sidcup.

OSCAR. Sidcup! [*He hands his jacket and hat to MAIMIE.*] Well, strike a light . . .

EMMA. Between them packin' cases—snug as a bug in a rug he'll be, and he c'n stay there for weeks, if needs be.

OSCAR. Weeks! In a cellar between perishin' packin' cases. She's off 'er chump, Ada.

EMMA. Chap in the war did it. Read it in the paper on'y yesterday. Three weeks in a walled-up cupboard, he was, 'idin' from Germans.

OSCAR. Look. 'Old on a minnit, will you, Ma? Get this straight—I ain't after any medals; all I want is a breath o' fresh air now an' again.

ADA. Bert. He's the man for us, and why not, if he aims to be our son-in-law when he stops tryin' to be big-time, and goes back to shop-lifting, like he's been trained for.

MAIMIE. I won't have you say things like that about Bert. He's just as good a safe-breaker as grandfather was.

OSCAR. But Sidcup! I meanter say . . .

MAIMIE [*desperately*]. Don't you see, Mum, nobody's *got* anything on Uncle Arthur at Sidcup—why, he lives in a semi-detached, and grows prize-winning cucumbers in his greenhouse.

OSCAR. Am I expected to lie low and live on 'is perishin' cucumbers? Blimey-o'-Riley, when I think of those terrible kids of 'is—the two that tied the pore blinkin' cat to the flagpole that time!

MAIMIE. Well, if you're going to make difficulties over everything, I can't help, can I?

EMMA [*half to herself*]. Snug as a bug in a rug, he'll be. We can even fix up a light down there and give him the papers to read every night.

ADA. Walthamstow—that's where he's going, Walthamstow.
[To MAIMIE] Now just you get on that phone and . . .

[*She is interrupted by a rapid and decisive knocking on the shop door off up c.*

CORA. It's them! They come for 'im!

OSCAR [*alarmed*]. Out the back . . .

[*There are knocks on the back door off R. MAIMIE dashes to the window, peers between the curtains and screws her head sideways to look down the alley.*

MAIMIE. It's no good, they're in the yard, two of them.

ADA [*crossing to the couch*]. Quick! Open up the front, Maimie.
[To EMMA] Lay on the couch, Mother.

EMMA. Me?

ADA. I got an idea.

OSCAR [*grabbing the trilby hat*]. The cupboard. I'll 'ide in the cupboard.

ADA. You'll do no such thing—it's a give-away. [To EMMA] Lay back on the couch, Mother, spread out your rug, and make out you're dying—that oughter be easy enough for you.

[EMMA puts her feet up and lies back on the couch. OSCAR crouches in the triangle between the couch and the fireplace. ADA quickly spreads the rug over EMMA and OSCAR.

[MAIMIE exits up c., taking OSCAR's clothes with her.
CORA dithers. The knocks off are repeated.

MAIMIE [*off; calling*]. Orl right, orl right, I'm coming as fast as I can—can't a shopkeeper close for stocktaking now and again?

[ADA makes last-minute adjustments to the rug.

ADA. Now go on, Mum, make as if you was reely suffering.
[She gives OSCAR's shrouded body a dig.] And don't you ser much as breathe, let alone cough.

[DETECTIVE-SERGEANT WILTON enters up c.
[She turns to WILTON.] Well, fancy you callin' on us. And us not so much as 'avin' the kettle on the boil. Why didn't you send and let us know we was bein' honoured?

[WILTON strides silently to the door down R. and opens it.

WILTON [*calling*]. All right, Hoskins, wait there.

[The knocks off R. cease. WILTON turns and grimly surveys the room.

[MAIMIE enters up C. and stands near the door. EMMA coughs delicately.

EMMA [*feebly*]. Who is it, Ada dear, is it my Oscar come 'ome to me?

[WILTON sees the cupboard down L., strides to it, and pulls the door open.

ADA. Well, I never did! [*To MAIMIE*] Didn't you offer to serve the gentleman in the shop, Maimie? [*To WILTON*] What is it you want, sir? Corn-plasters for yer pore flat feet?

[MAIMIE giggles. EMMA coughs softly. *She turns to EMMA.*] There now, Mum—couldn't you take another spoonful of that mixture the doctor sent round? Try, won't you? I'm sure it'll ease you. Pass the bottle, Cora, there's a dear girl.

[WILTON moves to the window, draws the curtain aside, and peers into the alley. CORA crosses to the table, picks up the bottle of medicine and a spoon, crosses to L. of the couch, and pours some medicine into the spoon.

Now hold it steady, dear. Maimie, hand me that other cushion to put behind pore mother's head.

[MAIMIE crosses to the armchair down R. and hands the cushion from it to ADA, who props it behind EMMA. ADA then takes the spoon from CORA and administers the medicine to EMMA. WILTON turns, relaxes somewhat, and grimly watches ADA, MAIMIE, and CORA grouped solicitously around the couch.

That's it. *Right* down. Yes, it's nasty, I know, dear, but it'll do you ever so much good—remember it did last time.

[*She hands the spoon to CORA.*

EMMA. Oscar, where are you, Oscar?

ADA. No, dear, it's not Oscar. We shan't none of us be seein' pore Oscar again fer a long, long time—[*to WILTON*] shall we, sir?

WILTON [*crossing above the table to C.; with a grim smile*]. It's my guess you'll be seeing him in five minutes, Mrs Sopworth.

ADA. Seein' Oscar? But they said . . .

WILTON. Oh, come come, now, you needn't pretend to *me*, Mrs Sopworth, I thought we were old friends. After all, we've seen quite a lot of one another over the years. [*He moves to the door up C., opens it, and addresses some one in the shop.*] Not yet, but he'll show up all right. Tell Hoskins to stay at the back and put Mervyn and Dixon

at each end of the street. Stay away from the actual door. [*He closes the door and turns.*] You heard what the judge handed him, I imagine?

ADA. How could we hear? We were none of us in court, were we?

WILTON. Syd Awkright was there, and he's a buddy of Oscar's, isn't he? Surely he phoned the news.

ADA [*sharply*]. Well, he didn't, and we don't want to hear it from you—we'll wait for the papers to tell us.

WILTON [*moving c.*]. Two years, and lucky, too, if you ask me—but then we might improve a little on that if he helps himself to anything else on the way over here.

MAIMIE. What's he talking about, Mum?

ADA. I don't know, I'm sure, it's all Greek to me, dear.

WILTON [*shrewdly*]. Is it? I wonder. Well, let's pretend it is, then. I can play charades as good as the next man. Oscar's on the run.

ADA. On the run? But you said . . .

WILTON. He made a bolt for it, leaving court. [*Admiringly*] He's pretty quick on his feet, isn't he? Why, bless my soul, Mrs Sopworth, if he gets out in time we'll ask him to represent us at the next Olympic Games, wherever they are. I'll wager he could do the hundred in under ten seconds on to-day's form.

ADA [*deliberately*]. If my Oscar *is* loose, and if you aren't pulling our legs just out o' devilment, then I should have thought even a policeman would have enough sense to decide that this is the last place he'd come.

WILTON [*cheerfully*]. Oh, just a hunch, Mrs Sopworth—just a hunch, so I wouldn't try anything if I were in your place. There's no harm in Oscar, he's rather a favourite of ours; just hand him over the minute he shows up, and I'll see he doesn't suffer for it. Is it a bargain?

[*ADA turns her back to WILTON and vigorously pokes the fire.*]

EMMA [*weakly*]. Tell him to go away, Ada, tell him to go away.

ADA. Take it easy, Mum, take it easy. [*She turns to WILTON. Angrily*] Can't you see you're distressing the pore ol' soul?

[*She replaces the poker in the hearth.*]

WILTON. Oh, yes, of course, we mustn't distress her, must we? Well—so long for now, everybody. [*He looks at CORA.*] Oh, I almost forgot. You're Mrs Safarelli, aren't you? Giuseppe Safarelli's missus?

CORA [*sulkily*]. Well, what if I am? I haven't set eyes on him in years.

WILTON. No, but don't worry—he isn't keeping us out at night nowadays. Got other things to think of, I suppose.

CORA [*quickly*]. What do you mean, 'other things to think of'?

WILTON [*easily*]. Oh, nothing. None o' my business, really; it's just that I thought you might like to know—he's given up night work and settled down in a little snack bar in Croydon. Doing very well, I hear—keeps him out of mischief—nice girl he's got behind the counter—dark . . . [*He makes a round gesture with his hands.*] Uh-huh! Brings all the busmen in for coffee and sandwiches.

[CORA *gapes* at WILTON.

[*He moves to the door up c.*] Well, so long, ladies.

CORA [*with a step towards WILTON*]. Croydon. Croydon, you said. What part o' Croydon?

WILTON [*turning*]. Now where was it? Just off the Purley by-pass. Hop off at the Swan and Sugar Loaf and walk back about a hundred yards. There's a sign over the front—The Drop-In, I think he calls it.

CORA [*aghast*]. Well! Did you hear that! Twelve months and not so much as a postcard.

WILTON. Don't forget—the minute Oscar shows up, get him to dial 999 or the local; either'll find me.

[WILTON *exits up c.* MAIMIE *follows him off, closing the door behind her.* ADA, *jubilant, relaxes.* CORA *stands stupefied.*

ADA [*crossing to the window*]. Well, I got to hand it to you, Gran, you were marvellous, absolutely marvellous. [*She opens the window curtains, then switches off the light.*] I must say there's something to be said for you actin' you was half dead all these years.

[*She crosses to the fireplace.*

EMMA. Actin'? Me actin'? I don't need to act wi' my state of health.

ADA [*nudging the rug*]. All right, Oscar, you can come out now.

[*She moves down R.C.*

[MAIMIE *enters up c.*

MAIMIE. I locked up; they're standing both ends of the street.

[OSCAR *emerges from the rug. He is perspiring freely.*

OSCAR. Cor luvverduck, Ada, that perishin' fire. Did you 'ave

to stoke it up like a furnace? [*He crosses to R. of the table.*] I'm cooked 'arfway through, so help me.

ADA. That's right, that's right, grumble, after relying on my wits to fool 'em.

EMMA. *Your wits!* Where do you reckon I come in? And as for that Cora, anyone but a policeman would have twigged something by looking at her.

CORA. A snack-bar. The Drop-In! [*She crosses to the table.*] And a girl standin' behind the counter. [*She slams the bottle and spoon on to the table.*] *My counter.*

[*She crosses resolutely to the door down R.*

MAIMIE [*crossing to L. of the couch*]. Now hold on, hold on, Auntie—you aren't going anywhere just yet, is she, Mum?

[*CORA stops and turns.*

ADA. Not her, not if I have to tie her to a chair.

OSCAR [*massaging himself*]. Cor lumme! It can't be no worse if everything in the Bible about 'ell bein' 'ot is true.

[*The others ignore OSCAR. From now on they speak almost as though he was not there.*

CORA. But you 'eard him, same as I did. 'Croydon,' he said, 'doing well,' he said, and a girl behind the counter living on my money.

ADA. Now lissen, Cora, lissen carefully. We need you to run messages—that was just what the copper was aimin' at, to get you out o' the way, and leave us short-handed. We can't phone for anyone, he knows that, so he tipped you off to get you out of the way, and you aren't fallin' for it, d'you understand?

CORA. But I'm going straight over, you can't stop me. I'm going straight into that little love-nest with my umbrella, the one with the spike on the end.

ADA. Later. To-morrow. The day after. But not till we get Oscar out of the way.

EMMA. He's not leaving here. Doesn't what happened prove I'm right? If he leaves here he'll walk straight into 'em no matter which way he goes.

ADA. He is leavin' here, no matter what you say. If he doesn't they'll be back in twenty-four hours and go over the place with a tooth-comb. Don't you agree, Oscar?

OSCAR. Well, yerse, but . . .

MAIMIE. I could get Bert to phone Alf to ask Arthur to call for him in the laundry van, the one we used on the Norbiton job.

EMMA. Oh, yerse, you could, but you might as well ask the Emporer of China to collect him in a jet plane; you might as well face it, we got no hope of gettin' him out of here for the next six weeks.

OSCAR. Six weeks? But lumme . . .

ADA. We can get him out of here in six minutes, soon as it's dark, providing all of you lend a hand, that is.

MAIMIE. How, that's what I'd like to know—how?

ADA. Do you think I didn't plan on something like this when we rented the shop? Look at that alley out there. How wide is it? He could jump from that sill to that wall in two ticks and be off over the timber-yard to meet your Bert and away.

CORA. 'Brings in the busmen,' he said, you heard him, same as I did. You know what *that* means, don't you?

EMMA [*ignoring* CORA]. I never heard so much dippy talk in all my born days, Ada. Talkin' like an amateur you are, same as if you got all your ideas out of a film or something. Down in our cellar, between the packing-cases he'd be that comfy he'd think he's on 'oliday at Brighton.

ADA. I'm not thinking of 'is comfort, I'm worrying about that sergeant searchin' the place. What happens to all of us if they nab him here?

OSCAR. But lissen, Ada, ol' girl . . .

MAIMIE. Soon as I tell Bert I know what he'll say. Run him over to Uncle Arthur's, that's what he'll say. Dad's been a good customer of Uncle's all these years, and it's up to him to look after him for a bit.

CORA. Can't you see her? Raven-black hair, lipstick, plunging neckline, and hips that wobble when she walks.

ADA [*furiously*]. Will you shut up about your Giuseppe's bit o' consolation, Cora.

CORA [*outraged*]. Consolation! Do you hear her? Consolation, she calls it.

EMMA. Down there between them packin' cases, living on the fat of the land, he'd be.

OSCAR. Look, Ma, will you give over talkin' about squeezing me between a couple o' blinkin' packing cases? So 'elp me, I'd sooner

spend six weeks in solitary than lie up down in a perishin' dungeon for weeks an' weeks an' weeks.

EMMA. All right, since you're so particular, it don't 'ave to be the cellar. We'll rig up a hideout in that airing-cupboard on the top landing. It's got room to stretch out in and . . .

OSCAR [*despairingly*]. Airing-cupboard! First it's a cellar and now it's an airing-cupboard. Who does she think I am—'Oodini?

ADA. Don't listen to her, Oscar, she's getting senile, if you ask me. Now you . . .

EMMA. Senile! Me senile! And come home with a whole basketful o' stuff the last time I went up West in the black-out.

ADA. What did I say? Black-out? Ten years ago that was, and most of the stuff you lifted was marked at one-and-eleven.

OSCAR. Now, we won't get nowhere be crittersizing one another's work, Ada.

MAIMIE. If Uncle Arthur won't help—Bert's brother Edward will. He's reel nice, Bert's brother is, ever since he give up warehouse-breaking and took to the stock market.

EMMA. Stock market! Huh! That's rich, that is. I can see meself trusting a son o' mine with a stockbroker. He'd be back inside in no time.

CORA. Twelve months an' not so much as a postcard.

MAIMIE. What I mean is, your plan of getting him out of here isn't workable, Mum. With a slop each end of the front and two more as good as living with us at the back, Dad'll have to be a kangaroo before he can clear that alley without anyone seeing him. Now if you ask me, we could get him out much easier in an empty crate.

[OSCAR, *alarmed*, reacts.]

ADA. Crate! Cellars! Airing-cupboards! What's the matter with all of you? You bin lissening to those radio serials or something? You don't have to go whimsey over a simple job like fooling a copper. Why, look 'ow easy I pulled wool over Sergeant Wilton's baby-blue eyes.

EMMA. *You* pulled wool over him. You! Well, if that isn't you all over, Ada. It was me who did all the actin'.

ADA. Whose idea was it? Tell me that. Didn't he go straight to the cupboard like I said he would? Didn't he, Cora?

CORA. Think of it. A black-haired beauty dipping her hand in my till . . .

ADA. Gag her, Maimie, tie 'er up an' gag her, before I do something I'll be sorry for.

CORA. It's all very well for you, Ada, and you, too, Maimie. You can make light of it, of course you can. You got Oscar, and Maimie's got Bert, but 'ow would you feel if your man was making money 'and over fist and spending it on a woman who brings the busmen in?

[OSCAR *sits R. of the table.*]

ADA. If the 'usband 'appened to be that soppy 'and-kissin' Eyetie you married I'd go down on me knees every night o' me life an' give thanks fer deliverance, that's wot I'd do.

CORA. Oh, it's easy to say, it's easy to say, but you were in a fine old state when Oscar took up with that little bit o' fluff over at Holland Park that time. Couldn't talk of nothing else, you couldn't, and you was snivelling over the fire all day long.

[OSCAR *cuts himself some bread and cheese and makes a quick but hearty meal.*]

ADA [*spiritedly*]. Snivelling, was I? Well, let me tell you, Cora, it it was *her* that did the snivelling that evening I saw 'em together on Clapham Common. She'll carry my marks on her wherever she goes, and as fer that Eyetie of yours, well, I've told you before, and I'll tell you again, the best turn he ever did you was to run out on you, and if you'll be guided by me you'll let well alone—and that's telling you straight, Cora.

CORA. Well, I won't, see. I'll get into that shop and *confront* her. That's what I'll do, *confront* her. I'll say, 'Good morning, Mrs Safarelli'—you can bet your life she uses my name, that sort always do—'Good morning, Mrs Safarelli,' I'll say, 'and how's your dear *husband* this morning?' And once she admits to having a husband I'll smash every bit o' crockery in the shop and lay her in ruins.

EMMA. Don't make me larf, Cora. As soon as you set eyes on that Eyetie you'll be eatin' out of his hand like you always did. D'you think we lived with you this long without knowing you? Why, I warned you against him from the start.

CORA. Ooo, you didn't, you did nothing o' the sort. You ate more than 'arf the chocklits he brought me.

EMMA. Well, there was no sense in seeing 'em go mouldy, was there?

MAIMIE. Look, what's all this got to do with getting dad off the hooks?

EMMA. Slimy! That's what he was, slimy. Comin' round here with his roses an' soppy talk. I could never make out why you give that nice 'Enery Ricketts the cold shoulder, Cora. Now there was one o' the most promising young sparks in the business.

CORA. Promising! Promising, you said. Why, he's doin' five years fer smash-an'-grab, isn't he?

ADA. So he might be, but he's left his 'widder' well provided for—I see 'er yesterday in the Jolly Waggoner, furs an' jools from 'ead to foot she was—that'll show you 'ow far 'and-kissing gets you.

MAIMIE. Have we gotter go over Aunt Cora's love-life inch by inch at a time like this?

EMMA. Don't you interrupt your mother when she's talking. You've got no room to crittersize with that Bert you're so gorn on. It's like I said soon as Ada suggested ringing 'im up, I wouldn't trust him with a marked threepenny bit.

MAIMIE [*shrilly*]. You leave Bert outer this. I won't have it, d'you 'ear; I won't 'ave you suggesting Bert's not to be trusted.

EMMA. Well, is he? Some one tipped somebody off about that little job down at the docks last Christmas, and every one knows Bert Nosworthy was in on it.

MAIMIE [*appealing to ADA*]. It's awful! 'Ark at her. You stand there asking me to ask Bert to hide Father, and let 'er say things like that about him all in the same breath.

ADA. I can't stop her saying what she pleases—I'd have done it long ago if I knew how, and don't you forget it.

EMMA. There it is again. [*To OSCAR*] That's what I bin putting up with in this house ever since you were run in, and that's what I'll have to put up with the minnit you leave here, Oscar. What sort of son do you think you are, sitting there eating bread and dripping while your poor old mother's set upon and persecuted? You oughter be ashamed o' yourself, downright ashamed o' yourself.

ADA. Now, just a minute, just a minute—before she starts another rumpus.

[*OSCAR washes down his bread and cheese with the remainder of the beer, rises, picks up the tea-cosy, crosses slowly to the telephone, puts the cosy on his head as an ear-muff, then quietly picks up the telephone receiver and*

dials a number. The others, engrossed in their squabble, do not notice.

CORA. It isn't Mum who starts all the rumpusses here, Ada, it's you. You bin a disruptive influence on the fam'ly ever since you come to it, twenty-five years ago.

ADA. Oh, I have, have I? Orl right, if you don't like living here you know what you c'n do. Oscar's my husband, and this is my house, and I don't have to remind you you're here on charity.

[OSCAR speaks softly into the telephone for a few moments, and his conversation can only be gauged by the movement of his mouth.]

CORA. Charity! Huh, that's a good one, I'm sure. Charity, and the down payment on the first house you lived in came from the nest-egg my dad saved out of his mail-van robbery. *[To EMMA]* Insulting the whole fam'ly now, she is. It's a fact, and you know it, Mum.

EMMA. Well, I'm bound ter admit, Ada, that Oscar could never have set up like he did if Father hadn't put his share of the money right back in the post office he pinched it from.

[OSCAR replaces the receiver, then stands as though looking for a place of refuge.]

MAIMIE. What do you want to stick up for her for, Grannie? Mum's right, she's been here on suff'rance ever since Giuseppe ran away from her nagging.

CORA. Ooooh! Ooooh! I won't stop here, I won't lissen to it.

ADA. Yes, you will—you asked for it and you will lissen to it.

[OSCAR crosses quietly to the cupboard down L., enters it and closes the door. The others do not miss him.]

You got no one but yourself to blame fer losing your husband, Cora. What did he get from you when he was here? Nag, nag, nag, as he come home at breakfast-time, and nag, nag, nag till he went out to work again at night. Not that I think you c'n *help* nagging, it seems to run in the fam'ly if living—*[she points to EMMA]* with her is anything to go by.

EMMA. That's enough o' that, Ada. I've stood all I'm going to stand from you with your nasty, spiteful, little stabs in the back. *[She retreats as she usually does, behind the barrier of ill health.]* Oooo! You're bringing it on again with your quarrels and arguing.

[*She rummages on the couch.*] The 'ot-water bottle, where's me 'ot-water bottle?

MAIMIE. Oh, don't act so stupid, Grannie, there's nothing the matter with you, and you know it. I'm sick to death of you lying on that couch pretending to suffer every time you think Mum's going to ask you to do anything.

EMMA [*tearfully*]. Now her! Now me own granddaughter's turned against me.

[*CORA, relishing an ally, turns to comfort EMMA.*

CORA. Never you mind her, Mum, I'll stay here and watch over you. Shame on the pair of you, bullying a sick old woman.

ADA. Sick! Ha! If she's sick I've bin dead on me feet since I come of age. [*She turns and looks around. Startled*] Oscar! Where's Oscar?

MAIMIE. He was here a minute ago.

ADA. He's gone. He's not here. [*She calls.*] Oscar!

[*ADA realizes for the first time that OSCAR is missing. The shock brings the quarrel to an abrupt end.*

[*WILTON enters down R.*

WILTON. That's it, Mrs Sopworth, where is Oscar?

[*EMMA, CORA, ADA and MAIMIE turn and gape at WILTON.*
Well, after all, Mrs Sopworth, he can't be far, he just phoned for me.

ADA. Phoned for you!

[*OSCAR emerges from the cupboard and with his hands outstretched together, awaiting as it were the welcome handcuffs, crosses to WILTON*

OSCAR. I'm here, guv'nor, and blimey-o'-Riley, am I glad to see you.

WILTON [*patting OSCAR's shoulder*]. There, there, Oscar, never mind about handcuffs—we're old friends, aren't we?

[*WILTON marches OSCAR off down R. and the others, speechless, stare after them as—*
the CURTAIN falls.

When the Roses Bloom Again

By Joe Corrie

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CHARACTERS

(in the order of their appearance)

HENRY WAINE, *an elderly civil servant*

ELIZABETH, *his wife*

WINNIE, *their daughter*

GEORGE LESTER, *a young civil servant*

The action takes place in the sitting-room of Henry Waine's bungalow in the suburbs of London.

TIME: the present.

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

When the Roses Bloom Again

SCENE: *The small sitting-room of Henry Waine's bungalow in the suburbs of London. A summer afternoon.*

The furniture, though thirty years old, is well-cared for. The fireplace is somewhat down stage in the R. wall; on the mantelpiece are various knick-knacks and photographs. Above the fireplace is a door leading to the small hall, upstairs rooms and the front door. C. of the back wall is a window that looks out on a small patch of garden, in which grows an apple-tree, and the backs of other houses of the same type. R. of the window there is a small table on which stands a radio set. L. of the window there is another table with a telephone on it. The door to the kitchenette and the back door is in the wall L. Below this door is a sideboard on which is a clock. A small sofa stands down L.C. facing down R. at an angle. There is an armchair by the fireplace, and a table up C. with three chairs.

When the curtain rises it is a sunny afternoon. The room is in a state of some disorder. There are articles of women's clothing over the back of the sofa and on the back of the chair by the fire. There is a large travelling-case on the sofa and one on the floor in front, both open and containing clothes. WINNIE, twenty-two years of age, wearing slacks and a jumper and smoking a cigarette, is on her knees at the sofa packing underwear. There is another case, already packed, on the table C. HENRY can be heard off L. singing to himself 'When the Roses Bloom Again.' There is a short pause, and then ELIZABETH enters R. She is fifty-five, quite good-looking, and carries her years lightly, but the discontent of many years has hardened her features. She is dressed for a long journey, and carries a few articles of underwear which she places over the back of the chair by the fire.

ELIZABETH. Did I hear you at the telephone, Winnie?

WINNIE. Yes. It was George, Mother.

ELIZABETH. Why didn't he phone at lunch-time, as he promised?

WINNIE. He said he had been too busy shopping.

ELIZABETH. Shopping! At the last minute! I hope you were furious with him?

WINNIE. I certainly was.

[ELIZABETH *folds the underclothing to pack it.*

ELIZABETH. Did you tell him that I was going to Edinburgh too?

WINNIE. Yes.

ELIZABETH. What did he say? [She helps WINNIE pack.

WINNIE. Damn.

ELIZABETH. That was very kind of him, wasn't it?

WINNIE. He thought, of course, that you were coming with us. He got a shock when I told him that you were going to the Imperial Hotel, and were travelling first-class.

ELIZABETH. Did you tell him what had happened?

WINNIE. No, but he's coming here, and we can all go to the station together. He hadn't even thought of booking a taxi.

ELIZABETH. I suppose he *did* book your seats and get the tickets?

WINNIE. If it hadn't been for me that wouldn't have been done. He kept putting it off and off almost as if he wasn't interested.

ELIZABETH. I've never understood why you persevered with him, Winnie. And being an ordinary clerk, too, doesn't improve your marriage prospects. You're going to have my experience all over again.

[ELIZABETH *has almost finished packing when HENRY sings a bit louder. She straightens herself quickly and calls to the left very sharply.*

Henree! Stop that noise—immediately!

[*There is a sudden silence off L.* WINNIE *rises.*

[*To* WINNIE] I never heard such ungratefulness in all my life.

WINNIE. It's the first time I've ever heard him sing in here.

[HENRY *appears L. He is a smallish, mild-looking man of sixty, wearing one of ELIZABETH'S aprons, and drying a plate with a cloth.*

HENRY. Did you speak, my dear?

ELIZABETH. Why are you singing, Henry?

HENRY [*to* ELIZABETH]. Singing! [*To* WINNIE] Me! [*To* ELIZABETH] Really! [*To* WINNIE] Surely not!

WINNIE [*reprovingly*]. You *were*—singing.

ELIZABETH. At the very pitch of your voice.

HENRY. I'm very sorry, my dear, *very* sorry. [*He tries to hide a smile. To WINNIE*] Everything going all right, Winnie?

WINNIE. George is coming here and we're all going off together. Make a cup of tea.

HENRY. Certainly—anything to oblige. I'll put the kettle on now.

[*He turns and is on his way to the door L. when ELIZABETH speaks to him.*]

ELIZABETH. Henry!

[*He halts and turns.*]

Now that George Lester is coming here I hope you don't create a scene when we part?

HENRY. Create a scene, Elizabeth! My dear, why should I?

[*This shocks both ELIZABETH and WINNIE.*]

ELIZABETH. Why *should* you!

WINNIE. Well, of all the things to say!

ELIZABETH [*to HENRY*]. We have been married for thirty years, haven't we?

HENRY. Thirty years to-morrow, to be exact. A long time, isn't it?

ELIZABETH. You do realize, I hope, that I am never coming back here?

HENRY. Oh, yes—yes, I realize that perfectly, my dear—perfectly.

ELIZABETH. I don't like the way you said that, Henry.

WINNIE [*to HENRY*]. Not even the trace of a sob in your voice.

HENRY. Well, things like this *can* happen, Winnie, even in a respectable suburb, and when they do we might as well accept them philosophically—mightn't we?

ELIZABETH. This is a very serious matter for *you*, Henry. Don't you realize that?

HENRY. Oh, yes, of course I do. But I want to bear up bravely, my dear. And, after all, I *do* have the consolation to know that you are about to make the journey into eternal happiness.

ELIZABETH. There is no need to be romantic over it.

HENRY. You know I wish you all the best in the world, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. I'll be much happier without your good wishes.

WINNIE [*to HENRY*]. What a thing to say at the last moment.

HENRY [*to WINNIE*]. I am merely expressing the fervent wish that's in my heart, Winnie.

ELIZABETH. Meaning that you are *happy* at my going?

HENRY. Oh, no, no, no, my dear—exactly the opposite. But what has happened is the will of God, and [*as he walks to go off L.*] God's will be done.

[HENRY exits L. ELIZABETH watches him go with a good deal of venom in her look.]

ELIZABETH. Any other man would have been prostrate with grief.

WINNIE. He'll cry his eyes out when you've gone, Mother.

ELIZABETH. I'm beginning to wonder. Still, it might be as well if I *did* go away with an even worse impression of him than I have held for the last thirty years.

[She resumes her packing. WINNIE has now finished, and closes her case.]

WINNIE. I wonder what George *will* say about it?

ELIZABETH. Does it matter?

WINNIE. Not to me.

ELIZABETH. And much less to me.

[She is now packing a bathing-costume. WINNIE goes over to her.]

WINNIE [*surprised*]. Are you taking a bathing-costume, Mother?

ELIZABETH. Why not?

WINNIE. I didn't know you could swim.

ELIZABETH. You didn't know me before I had the misfortune to meet your father.

WINNIE. And does Mr Berwick—William, swim, too, Mother?

ELIZABETH. In our young days we were both passionately devoted to the sea.

WINNIE. What a pity you didn't marry him then, Mother. Why didn't you?

ELIZABETH. He thought he loved another woman better than he loved me.

WINNIE. How silly of him. But I do hope that you make up for all the lost happiness now, Mother.

ELIZABETH. Of that I haven't the slightest doubt.

[HENRY is heard singing again.]

[*Very loudly*] Henry! I won't warn you again!

[HENRY stops singing immediately.]

ELIZABETH. Take note of that, Winnie—a woman's reward after thirty years of faithful and slavish devotion.

WINNIE. This is going to give George something to think about, Mother.

ELIZABETH. George is following so closely in the footsteps of your father that it will be too much pain for him to think.

WINNIE. I wonder what the neighbours will say when they know that you have gone for ever?

ELIZABETH. I'm not the slightest bit concerned. Once I get away from this house—and the neighbours—I hope I'll forget that I ever lived here. [*Suddenly*] Oh, I still have my winter costume to pack. I'll just have room for it, I think.

[HENRY, *now without the apron, but still coatless, enters L.*

HENRY. Is there anything I can do to help, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH [*very curtly*]. Nothing at all—thank you!

[ELIZABETH *exits quickly R.*

WINNIE. Will you take that case from the table and put it over at the door?

HENRY. Certainly, my dear—certainly.

[*He picks up the case and puts it by the door R.*

WINNIE. You can take my other case over, too.

HENRY. You're taking a lot of luggage for two weeks, aren't you?

WINNIE. That's my business.

HENRY. Sorry.

[*He carries the case, which is fairly heavy, to the door and places it beside the other. WINNIE lights a cigarette and goes to the sofa to sit on the arm of it. HENRY, attracted by the bathing-costume, goes to ELIZABETH's case.*

Oh, your mother's taking a bathing-costume!

WINNIE. Why not?

HENRY. No reason at all, Winnie. She's not an old woman, and she was a good swimmer in her young days—so she told me once.

WINNIE. I'm going to ask Mother down to my wedding at Christmas. Any objections?

HENRY. None at all. It would be nice if Mr Berwick could attend too, wouldn't it? Unless, of course, George objected.

WINNIE. Why should he object?

HENRY. Well, as your father, I'd be there too, I hope.

WINNIE. I'll have to think about that.

HENRY. Have you told George yet?

WINNIE. He'll hear all about it when he comes.

HENRY. He'll be highly amused, I'm sure.

WINNIE. It'll be something, I hope, to warn him of dangers that can be part of married life.

HENRY. Yes, that's how we all live and learn, Winnie, how we all live and learn. [*He sings his song again, then suddenly puts his hand to his mouth.*] I beg your pardon. [*The front door bell rings.*]

WINNIE. That's George now. Show him in.

[HENRY moves up-stage and calls off R.]

HENRY. Just come in, George!

[*We hear the outside door shutting, then GEORGE enters R. He is twenty-four years of age, quite a serious young man, smartly dressed in sports coat and well-pressed flannels. He carries a lightweight mackintosh which he places on top of WINNIE'S cases. Then he holds out his hand to HENRY.*]

GEORGE. And how are you, Mr Waine?

HENRY. I'm very well, George, thank you, very well indeed—[*suddenly remembering*] under the circumstances. Looking forward to your holiday?

GEORGE. I am—quite a lot. When one is in love, Mr Waine . . .

HENRY. I know, my boy, I know, there's nothing you can tell me. [*Suddenly*] Oh, the kettle! Excuse me.

[HENRY hurries off L. GEORGE goes towards WINNIE, still on the sofa, and flicking her cigarette ash on the carpet.]

GEORGE. Sorry about not being able to phone at lunch-time, Winnie, but . . .

WINNIE. I heard your excuse, George.

GEORGE. What were you trying to tell me about your mother?

WINNIE. Sit down.

[GEORGE sits on the arm of the chair at the fire.]
Something really sensational has happened.

GEORGE. Sensational?

WINNIE. Sensational, and romantic. An old sweetheart of Mother's has come back from Australia to live in Edinburgh, and he has asked Mother to join him.

GEORGE [*greatly perplexed*]. Join him? For a holiday?

WINNIE. Of course not—for good. He's tremendously rich, and still very much in love with her.

GEORGE. Doesn't he know that your mother is married?

WINNIE [*laughing*]. Of course he knows she's married. They've been carrying on a secret correspondence for years.

GEORGE. Well, of all the . . .

WINNIE. All the what, George?

GEORGE. Does your father know about it?

WINNIE. Certainly he does. Mother got a letter from William last night with his invitation, and she just handed it to Father to read.

GEORGE. And what did he say?

WINNIE. Just looked over his spectacles and said, 'Well, my dear, if you are going to be happier with William, by all means accept his invitation.' Rather brave of Mother, wasn't it—being so frank about it instead of just stealing away leaving the usual kind of letter on the table? But isn't it romantic? Going off to spend the rest of life with a sweetheart of the long, long ago, at the age of fifty-five?

GEORGE [*with disapproval*]. Do you think that fifty-five *can* be an age for romance?

WINNIE. Where a woman is concerned *any* age is an age for romance. Remember that, George . . . I only hope that I'll have some romance left in me at the age of fifty-five.

GEORGE. Your *father* can't be getting much romance out of it—at the age of *sixty*.

WINNIE. These things can happen, George, and he'll just have to make the best of it.

[*She lights another cigarette.*]

GEORGE. Am I supposed to know about this—in front of them, I mean?

WINNIE. Of course: there's no secret. It has all been discussed freely, and above-board. After all, we *are* living in the atomic age, George.

GEORGE [*more puzzled than ever*]. Yes, Winnie, we may be, but we are also living in what is supposed to be a quite respectable suburb.

WINNIE. I wonder how many cupboards there are in this one *street*, even, that contain skeletons?

GEORGE. But isn't this skeleton of yours rather unique?

WINNIE. That's what makes it all the more amusing to me, George.

GEORGE. I'm afraid I don't quite understand.

WINNIE. You will when you hear both their stories.

[ELIZABETH enters R. with her costume. GEORGE rises.

ELIZABETH [*still in a curt manner*]. Afternoon!

GEORGE [*as if ELIZABETH was a woman he had not met before*]. Good afternoon, Mrs Waine.

[ELIZABETH goes to put the costume in the case. HENRY enters L. with a laden tea-tray.

ELIZABETH [*sharply*]. Henry!

HENRY [*pausing on his way to the table*]. Yes, my dear?

ELIZABETH. Put your coat on—please!

HENRY. Certainly. [*He turns and goes off L., taking the tray.*

GEORGE [*not too happy to hear HENRY spoken to like that*]. I've engaged a taxi, Mrs Waine. Is that all right with you?

ELIZABETH. Thank you. I'll pay for it.

GEORGE. Not at all, Mrs Waine, you must allow me—

WINNIE. If Mother wants to, George . . .

GEORGE. Very well, Winnie, but I think it is a bit too kind. After all . . .

WINNIE. Leave it at that—please.

ELIZABETH [*trying to shut her case*]. Oh, dear, I can't get this shut.

GEORGE. Allow me, Mrs Waine.

[GEORGE closes the case by putting his knees on it.

[HENRY enters L., now wearing his coat, but without the tray.

WINNIE. The tea, Father.

HENRY. Oh! The emotional strain is making me absent-minded.

[*He goes off again L.*

GEORGE [*to ELIZABETH*]. Mr Waine has changed, somehow—don't you think?

ELIZABETH. How? [*She crosses and sits in the chair by the fire.*

GEORGE. I don't know. . . . He looks younger, I think.

[HENRY enters with the tray, and is humming his song, but stops immediately he remembers. He places the tray on the table C.

HENRY. Sit down, George.

[GEORGE is about to sit down at the table when WINNIE speaks.

WINNIE. Sit down here, George.

GEORGE [*with a smile*]. Of course.

[*He sits beside WINNIE on the sofa. HENRY starts pouring out tea.*]

HENRY [*going to ELIZABETH with a cup of tea*]. I'm sure you'll be glad to get this cup, Elizabeth. [*To GEORGE*] There's nothing like a cup of tea to settle the nerves, George.

ELIZABETH. There's nothing whatever wrong with my nerves, Henry. In fact I haven't been more placid for years.

HENRY. I'm so very glad, my dear—so very glad.

[*After he has given the cup to ELIZABETH he returns to the table.*]

GEORGE [*a hint to WINNIE*]. Can I help you, Mr Waine?

WINNIE. Of course not; Father is used to that.

HENRY [*to GEORGE*]. In fact, George, it is one of my great pleasures. [*He takes tea to WINNIE and GEORGE. To ELIZABETH*] I hope you allow yourselves plenty of time to get to Euston, my dear.

ELIZABETH. And why do you hope so?

HENRY. Well, Edinburgh isn't Brighton, you know; trains don't run every hour. If you lose this one . . .

ELIZABETH. Which you are fervently hoping I don't?

HENRY. Now, now, Elizabeth, remember that we have been together—in this house—for thirty long years.

ELIZABETH. As if I could ever forget *that*.

[*GEORGE is looking at HENRY.*]

HENRY. Elizabeth is leaving us, George.

GEORGE. So I understand, Mr Waine.

HENRY [*with a smile*]. Are you shocked?

GEORGE. Mystified is the right word, Mr Waine. . . . After thirty years!

ELIZABETH. Does time make any difference?

GEORGE. Well—I just don't understand, Mrs Waine.

HENRY. I didn't at first either, George, but after what Elizabeth said last night . . . [*To ELIZABETH*] I agreed with every word you said, my dear—every word.

ELIZABETH [*to GEORGE*]. You are going to marry Winnie at Christmas, George?

GEORGE. Yes.

ELIZABETH. And you hope to live in Edgeway here?

GEORGE. Oh, yes.

ELIZABETH. And buy a house?

GEORGE. There's no other way of getting a home of one's own, Mrs Waine.

ELIZABETH. Then for your own sake I had better tell you what life has meant to me here, and might mean to Winnie too, in time.

WINNIE. It's something that *every* man should know before he marries, George.

[*There is now a slight pause to listen to ELIZABETH.*]

ELIZABETH. You see this little house—in this dead hole of a suburb? Just a few bricks—some cement—water pipes—and a kitchen sink—a roof above it that has never been really weather-proof?

GEORGE. Yes?

ELIZABETH. In order to pay the quarterly instalments to purchase it—on the salary of a clerk in the Civil Service—I have been imprisoned to a life of poverty, misery, and utter loneliness.

WINNIE [*to GEORGE*]. Yet never once did I hear her complain.

[HENRY coughs.]

ELIZABETH. The same routine, day after day, month after month, year after year, until I became a mechanical thing with a dead soul. Up in the morning to get breakfast prepared and see my husband off at precisely three minutes past eight to get his train to the city.

HENRY [*laughingly*]. I once tried leaving at four minutes past eight, George, and, would you believe it, I lost my train. That taught me a lesson.

ELIZABETH [*with a sneer*]. And true to suburban custom we kissed in the hall.

HENRY. Every morning for thirty years. How boring!

WINNIE [*jumping to her feet*]. How can you say such a thing, Father?

ELIZABETH [*rising quickly*]. Why *did* you kiss me if you were bored?

HENRY. I didn't kiss *you*, my dear, it was always you who kissed *me*.

WINNIE. And this is only coming out now!

HENRY. Your mother has been so frank with me, Winnie, that it is only fair I should be frank with her now. [*To ELIZABETH*] But go on, my dear, you're not finished yet.

[*After looking at HENRY with bitter scorn ELIZABETH sits again to speak to GEORGE.*]

ELIZABETH. The same old domestic duties, to be done at the same time—washing-up, dusting, polishing, *and* scrubbing. The same old meals to cook—the same shops to visit—meeting the same dull people—year after year. The same long and weary afternoons, knitting, sewing, listening to the same dull programmes on the radio. Then at precisely four o'clock beginning to prepare the evening meal. And then the long, silent nights with a husband who had nothing to talk about but his office. It wasn't just boring, it was torture!

WINNIE [*to* GEORGE]. So leave the office at the office, George—that's one good hint. [*She sits.*]

GEORGE [*to* ELIZABETH]. My mother leads the same kind of life, Mrs Waine, but *she* never grumbles.

ELIZABETH. Neither did I, but my soul rebelled against it all the time—as, no doubt, your mother's does.

GEORGE. But what has been lacking, Mrs Waine?

ELIZABETH. Money. With money to spare I could have taken trips to the city—I could have done shopping there—I could have dined there—I could have gone to a theatre. The only time I have ever seen a play in London has been once a year, on our wedding anniversary.

HENRY. Once a year, George, and, to make things worse, we usually saw a play about people who were happy.

ELIZABETH [*still to* GEORGE]. In all my married life I have only had two holidays.

HENRY. Both at Brighton—in atrocious boarding-houses.

ELIZABETH. As for clothes—the thought of what I've had to wear infuriates me.

GEORGE. I always thought you dressed rather well, Mrs Waine.

ELIZABETH. Men always make that excuse.

WINNIE. Always. [*To* GEORGE] So get that into your head, George—women adore really nice clothes, and lots and lots of changes. And they shouldn't have to go out and work for them either.

ELIZABETH. Now I can have all the money I wish—can have everything that a woman dreams of. Do you blame me for taking the chance?

WINNIE. I certainly don't, Mother.

HENRY [*to* ELIZABETH]. Neither do I, my dear.

ELIZABETH. You don't!

HENRY. For *your* sake, my dear—*your* sake.

GEORGE [*to HENRY*]. And have *you* been happy all those years, Mr Waine?

HENRY. Happy! My God, George, the times I've wanted to commit suicide, but never had the courage.

[*HENRY walks to the back of the table. WINNIE and ELIZABETH rise to their feet quickly.*

WINNIE. You thankless, heartless—brute!

ELIZABETH. You hypocrite!

HENRY. Well, perhaps suicide is an exaggeration, but the times I have longed to go and get drunk, then come home and set this house on fire . . . [*To GEORGE*] But I've never known what it is to drink, George, and I don't suppose I'd have known how to get drunk if I'd *had* the chance.

ELIZABETH. Then why did you hide all that from me?

HENRY. Probably because you were hiding your evil thoughts from me, my dear. [*To GEORGE*] I once toyed with the idea, George, of murdering my wife and burying her in the garden.

WINNIE. Oh, my God!

[*She sinks on to the sofa and buries her head in her hands.*

ELIZABETH [*madly, but with some fear in her voice, too*]. You—you mental murderer! [*She strides towards the telephone.*] I'm going to get a taxi right away.

HENRY [*moving in front of her*]. I'm not finished yet, my dear.

[*ELIZABETH, after facing him, shrinks back a pace from him.*

WINNIE. I'll telephone, Mother.

[*GEORGE rises and takes a firm hold of her.*

GEORGE. Oh, no, you won't. I've heard your mother's side of the story, and now I would like to hear your father's.

WINNIE [*bewildered*]. George! You're hurting me!

GEORGE. Sorry. Sit down.

[*But WINNIE strides L., both angered and distressed.*

HENRY. I don't have much to say, really. Just that because of your discontent, my dear, I have been bullied, brow-beaten, reviled, scorned, and treated as if I were a worm instead of a human being. You could not satisfy your ambitions, and you couldn't come to accept what little comfort and security I could give you, so you have wreaked your spite on me all the time. I bore it with sufferance, Elizabeth, because I am a man of simple tastes; quite content with

what I have because I know that I cannot receive any more—a man of peace, Elizabeth, and you have made my life a hell. Now that I am free to live my own little life as I wish to live it, I am thankful to God, from the very bottom of my heart, that you are going away—never to come back.

WINNIE [*very angry*]. Mother won't be the only one to go away and never come back.

HENRY. Very well, Winnie, make up your own mind about that.

WINNIE [*to GEORGE*]. After our holiday I'll live with *your* mother till we get married.

GEORGE. I'm sorry, Winnie, but I can't agree with that arrangement.

WINNIE. Why not? Surely I have a right to—under the circumstances?

GEORGE. Women have no rights until they are married.

WINNIE. Well, of all the things to say! George, you do surprise me!

GEORGE. Not nearly as much as you have surprised me, Winnie.

WINNIE. What d'you mean, George?

GEORGE. I've been getting my eyes opened, that's all. Your mother isn't what I have thought, and neither are you—under her influence.

WINNIE. We can discuss this on our holiday.

[*She turns from him as if she had dismissed the matter.*]

GEORGE. No, we can't.

WINNIE [*turning*]. Why not?

GEORGE. I'm not going on holiday now.

WINNIE [*shocked*]. George!

GEORGE. We can discuss it when you come back, Winnie—alone.

[WINNIE looks pleadingly at ELIZABETH.]

ELIZABETH. Don't distress yourself, my dear. You can come with me.

[*But this doesn't bring much comfort to WINNIE.*]

WINNIE [*going to GEORGE again*]. George, you don't mean this. You can't! What will all my friends think?

GEORGE. If you believe that your mother's action is justified that shouldn't trouble you, Winnie.

WINNIE. So it isn't me at all, it's Mother?

GEORGE. Would you do the same thirty years hence—if you were tempted by money?

WINNIE. Well, I . . . Probably.

GEORGE. In the interval I might have to suffer all that your father has suffered?

ELIZABETH. And what have I suffered?

GEORGE. I am discussing this with Winnie, Mrs Waine.

WINNIE. But surely a mother has the right to interfere on her daughter's side, George? She has had the experience: she knows what married life can be.

ELIZABETH. Only too well, Winnie, only too well.

WINNIE. You must agree with that, George—surely?

GEORGE. Perhaps you'd better remain with your mother, Winnie, then you'll always be in good care.

WINNIE [*to HENRY*]. Father, can't you speak to him?

ELIZABETH. You would lower yourself like that! After all, what is he?

GEORGE [*to ELIZABETH*]. I'm just a Civil Service clerk who may never be anything else, Mrs Waine, but I know that I could be happy as such with the right wife.

WINNIE. Are you saying that I cannot be that woman, George?

GEORGE. I'm very doubtful about that now, Winnie.

WINNIE. You are!

GEORGE. Yes—very doubtful.

[WINNIE *now breaks and goes to ELIZABETH for sympathy.*

GEORGE *turns his gaze from this distressing scene.*

HENRY *isn't at all happy.*

HENRY [*going to GEORGE*]. Oh, dear, am I to blame for this, George?

GEORGE. Not at all, Mr Waine; evidently it had to happen some time.

ELIZABETH [*to the still weeping WINNIE; patting her on the shoulder*]. Now, now, my dear, don't distress yourself like that. You can spend your holiday with me—in luxury, and not in a stuffy old boarding-house. William, thank God, has enough humanity to be both a husband to me, and a father to you.

[*E*] WINNIE. Thank you, Mother.

[*The honk! honk! of a taxi is heard in the street. As if she had received a sudden shock*] Oh! [*To ELIZABETH*] Must we go now?

ELIZABETH. Yes, Winnie, we mustn't delay.

[ELIZABETH *picks up her handbag from the table up* R.C. *and puts some powder on her face.* WINNIE *goes to* GEORGE.

WINNIE. George, let's forget what has happened. Do come, my dear.

GEORGE. I couldn't enjoy a holiday now, Winnie, honestly I couldn't.

WINNIE. Oh, very well, then, if you have made up your mind so have I. [*She pulls the engagement ring from her finger and tosses it at him.*] There. But don't think it's the end.

ELIZABETH [*to* HENRY]. Henree! My luggage!

HENRY [*still dazed*]. Certainly—certainly, my dear.

[*He is on his way towards the luggage when GEORGE speaks.*

GEORGE. I wouldn't if I were you.

HENRY [*halting*]. Of course not! I must remember that I am no longer a hypocrite.

WINNIE [*to* GEORGE]. At least you will have enough of the gentleman in you to help me with *my* luggage.

GEORGE. Unless you hurry you will lose your train.

ELIZABETH. Come along, Winnie; we *must* hurry! [*She tries to lift her case. It is very heavy. A bit desperately*] Help me with this one, Winnie.

[WINNIE, *after casting a fierce look at GEORGE, goes to her mother. Between them, but even then with a struggle, they move, rather ungracefully, to the door* R. *with the case.*

[ELIZABETH and WINNIE *exit* R.

HENRY. How do you think I should say good-bye, George?

GEORGE. How d'you feel like saying it?

HENRY. Very, very formally, with a 'Thank God' after it.

GEORGE. You couldn't do better, Mr Waine.

[ELIZABETH and WINNIE, *a bit exhausted, return for the other big case.*

ELIZABETH [*to* HENRY]. So this is my final reward for services rendered?

HENRY. I could have a long discussion with you over that, my dear, but . . .

WINNIE. We'll have to hurry, Mother! Help me with this one.

[*She grabs her case.*

ELIZABETH. Well, Henry—good-bye, and—thank God!

HENRY. Oh, dear, you have taken the very words from my mouth. Good-bye, Elizabeth—and give William my kindest regards—God help him!

[ELIZABETH and WINNIE struggle out with the other case. Well, that's that over, George—only twenty-nine years too late.

[WINNIE hurries back for her smaller case.

WINNIE [after lifting her case]. Good-bye—you Civil Service stooges!

[WINNIE hurries off. There is a slight pause, then GEORGE and HENRY go to the window to look off R.

HENRY. Well, they've gone. Have you many regrets, George?

GEORGE. No, Mr Waine, I—I don't think so.

HENRY. Just afraid that Winnie might become a second edition of her mother—in time? [They turn and move down C.

GEORGE. Marriage at the best is a risky business with the woman who seems suitable in every way. At the moment I have too many doubts about Winnie.

HENRY. Perhaps you are right, my boy—perhaps you are right.

[HENRY sits on the sofa, while GEORGE stands at the fire.

GEORGE [with surprise]. Mr Waine. I'm just beginning to realize how much I've been under the influence of Winnie. I was always changing my mind and could never understand why.

HENRY [with a little laugh of understanding]. Oh, my boy, don't I know!

GEORGE. I had planned to take my holiday in August, not in June. I had planned to go to Cornwall, not to Scotland. And I don't know why I chose Christmas to get married—I've always wanted a honeymoon in summer. And when I wished to go to a theatre I always found myself at the pictures. But I never dreamt that Winnie's influence was behind all those changes.

HENRY. In the hands of Woman, my boy, Man is but an innocent little child. But, mark you, if they are taken in hand at the very beginning it would be a different story. I can realize now that had I started off with the right foot forward Elizabeth might have made a very good wife—she has all the capabilities. But I gave in at the beginning, and that was the end of both my happiness and hers. A pity, but there you are. And I *do* feel some regrets, you know.

GEORGE. Naturally. I do too, Mr Waine. Winnie has her good points.

HENRY. Elizabeth has them, too, George, *many* good points, and—well, as I say, things might have been different—only they weren't.

[*The front-door bell rings loudly. HENRY jumps to his feet.*
Oh, are they back?

GEORGE. I'll see, Mr Waine.

[*GEORGE goes off R., HENRY moves apprehensively C. After a short pause GEORGE returns with a telegram in his hand.*

It's a telegram for your wife. The boy is waiting to see if there is a reply. [HENRY takes the telegram, tremblingly, and opens it.

HENRY. Oh, I don't have my spectacles. You read it, George.

[*GEORGE takes the telegram.*

GEORGE [*reading*]. Please cancel journey Stop. Being married to-morrow. Stop. William. Stop.

HENRY. What's that! Will you read it again?

GEORGE. Please—cancel—journey. Being—married—to-morrow. William.

HENRY. Oh, my poor Elizabeth! Oh, dear, what am I going to do?

GEORGE. No reply. [*He goes to the door R. and calls.*] No reply—thank you!

[*HENRY is now in a state of excitement and distress and walks about the room in a dazed manner.*

HENRY. The brute! The villain! The cur! How can I let her know! I wonder if that taxi has that walkie-talkie thing . . . ? What's the number of the garage, George?

[*He makes a bee-line for the telephone.*

GEORGE. You needn't telephone that garage, it is one of the old-fashioned places.

HENRY. I know what I'll do. I'll telephone to the station-master—I have heard announcements come through the station loud-speakers.

[*GEORGE hurries to the telephone and puts his hand on the receiver.*

GEORGE. Don't do anything so foolish, Mr Waine.

HENRY [*in great distress*]. But she will arrive in Edinburgh, and . . . Oh, my poor Elizabeth! Please let me phone, George—please! She will die of the humiliation.

GEORGE [*still keeping his hand on the receiver*]. Indeed and she won't, Mr Waine, she has a very strong heart.

HENRY. But try and imagine her ordeal . . . !

GEORGE. That's just what I *can* imagine. She will realize what an utter fool she has been. And will appreciate, too, she has a comfortable home here, and a faithful husband. She'll come back, Mr Waine—oh, yes, she'll come back, and be only too grateful to be content with her lot in future.

HENRY. Do you think so?

GEORGE. I'm sure of it. Twenty-four hours from now she'll be a sadder, but a much wiser old woman.

[HENRY walks towards the sideboard.

And now that you realize what went wrong with your marriage, Mr Waine, it'll be up to you to rectify things.

HENRY. But it is such a long journey to Edinburgh, George—and to receive such a blow . . . ! I do think I should telephone the station.

GEORGE. No, Mr Waine. It may be a long journey there, but it will be a much longer journey back—with something to think about that neither of them will ever forget.

HENRY. Perhaps you are right. . . . And does this mean that you and Winnie might come together again?

GEORGE. I'm not making any prophecies, Mr Waine, but I wouldn't be surprised if I—well, think of all her virtues, and, perhaps, forgive her for the few things which she can't help. I'm not perfect myself, of course, but I'll be firm—very firm. Now, what d'you want to do in your first hour of freedom?

HENRY. Would you believe it, George, I think I'd like to have a drink, and play a game of darts.

GEORGE. A jolly good idea, Mr Waine—let's go over to *The Bride and Bridegroom*.

HENRY. Good-o! But just a minute, George.

[HENRY hurries off L. GEORGE'S eyes begin to search the floor.

[HENRY returns with two lovely bright flowers.

Allow me, George.

[He puts one in GEORGE'S coat.

GEORGE. Now, allow me, Mr Waine. [He puts the other flower in HENRY'S coat.] And now, Mr Waine, hoping for the best, will you give me a hand to look for that engagement ring?

HENRY. Certainly.

[*They both get down on their knees.*

[*Finding it*] Here you are, George—and without my spectacles, too! Well, well, I am even *seeing* better already.

[*HENRY gives GEORGE the ring, and they both rise.*

GEORGE. Thank you, Mr Waine. Now we can go, and if we get a drop too much will it matter?

HENRY. Not a tuppenny hoot, George. [*He takes GEORGE's arm.*] And to let you see I have the courage . . .

[*He begins to sing 'When the Roses Bloom Again.'*

[*GEORGE joins him in his singing, and arm in arm they cross to go off R. as—*

the CURTAIN falls.

The Living Image

By Barbara Bingley

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CHARACTERS

(in the order of their appearance)

MADAME LA COMTESSE DE BOISGELIN LA TOUR

CLOTHILDE, *her granddaughter*

JUSTINE, *an old serving-woman*

MONSIEUR L'ABBÉ CLEDAT DE LANGLADE

ANSELM, *a novice*

FATHER POLYDORE

The action of the play passes in a room in the Château de Boisgelin on an April evening at the beginning of the nineteenth century

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

The Living Image

SCENE: *A room in the Château de Boisgelin. An April evening at the beginning of the nineteenth century.*

The room is high, old, and full of sombre beauty. A long window with a window seat back C. looks out on to a landscape like the background of an Italian painting. The door is L. There is a great bed with brocade hangings R. with a fireplace below it. A small table stands below the head of the bed and a larger table L.C. is set out with books and silver candlesticks. An armchair stands L. and a stool R. of it. Up L.C. there is a carved marriage chest, and there are two high-backed chairs, one up R. and one up L.

When the curtain rises it is late afternoon, and as the action proceeds the light fades into the blue dusk of evening. A fire burns in the fireplace. MADAME LA COMTESSE DE BOISGELIN LA TOUR is in bed. She is aged eighty. She has been beautiful and cannot forget it, so her face is raddled with rouge, and her head nods under a monstrous cap. CLOTHILDE, her granddaughter, is seated on the window seat, near the right end, where she is concealed from the COMTESSE by the window curtains. She is sixteen, pale, slender, and enigmatic. She has a mirror in one hand, and with the other she holds the tassel of the curtain cord. She tries the effect of the tassel as an earring, first on one side of her face, and then on the other.

COMTESSE. Clothilde!

CLOTHILDE [*dropping the tassel and hiding the mirror behind a cushion*]. Yes, madame.

COMTESSE. What are you doing?

CLOTHILDE. Looking out of the window, Grandmère.

COMTESSE. Have you nothing better to do? What do you see?

CLOTHILDE. Blue smoke. They're making charcoal on the hill.

COMTESSE. Can you see the charcoal-burners, too?

CLOTHILDE. Yes, they look like black ants.

COMTESSE [*maliciously*]. Ah, and a man, even if he looks like an ant—and a black ant at that, since he's a charcoal-burner—is a pleasanter sight than one's grandmother, *hein?*

CLOTHILDE [*rising*]. I'm sorry, I thought you were asleep. [*She moves to the foot of the bed.*] Shall I read to you?

COMTESSE. What is there to read?

CLOTHILDE. We never finished that tale by the Chevalier de Boufflers. [*She moves to the table* L.C.]

COMTESSE. No. No more tales. They all tell of love, and I sickened of love twenty years ago. Kiss and kiss again—part, quarrel, and betray—it's all so stale. Choose something else.

CLOTHILDE [*picking up a book from the table* L.C.]. Here are the *Flowers of St Francis*.

COMTESSE. I've no patience with sham rustics. People who ape the peasant should be whipped. [*Fretfully*] They tell me I mustn't say things like that now. When does the priest come?

CLOTHILDE [*replacing the book on the table*]. After Vespers. I heard the bell ring half an hour ago. [*She moves to the foot of the bed.*] He'll be here soon.

COMTESSE. I hope the young one comes. Father—Father . . . What's his name, child?

CLOTHILDE. Father Anthony came yesterday.

COMTESSE [*impatiently*]. And spilt snuff on the bedcover, and blessed me with hands that smelt of age. Fool, haven't you eyes to see whether a man is old or young?

CLOTHILDE. You mean Father Polydore. I know him. I see him sometimes when I go to the woods. He strides up and down the path at the end of the Abbey garden as if the devil were after him.

COMTESSE. Yes. A dark, tormented creature—but handsome. You can let him in if he comes, but not that snuffling Anthony. They must send me priests who please me if they want my jewels for their new Madonna.

CLOTHILDE. Very well. Shall I fetch your gruel now?

COMTESSE. No. I'm sick of pap. Come here, let me look at you.

[*CLOTHILDE moves to the down-stage side of the bed and stands near the* COMTESSE.]

[*She takes CLOTHILDE's face between her hands.*] You're horribly young—and pale. You should wear rouge. How long have you been here? I forget so much.

CLOTHILDE. Six weeks. I came on St Valentine's Day.

COMTESSE. Yes, yes, days don't matter. I've so few left now I don't want to hear them counted. Why did you come? To listen to an old woman's complaints? To make posset and play chess? One doesn't do all these without a reason. What do you expect?

CLOTHILDE [*crossing to C.; embarrassed*]. Nothing. At least—not much. My mother sent me.

COMTESSE. But she told you why. Who loves the old? No one. But when Grandmother has a little jewel casket we send our daughters to watch by her bedside to see the priests don't get all it contains. Am I right?

CLOTHILDE. Yes—in a way. But I wanted to come. I wanted to see you.

COMTESSE. Don't flatter, child. You had no choice—now had you?

CLOTHILDE. No. But I was glad to come.

COMTESSE [*shrewdly*]. Glad to leave home, you mean.

CLOTHILDE. It isn't easy at home, at Clairvaux, now.

COMTESSE. Not easy—that means empty purses and old clothes. No wonder she wants my jewels—the ugly creature.

CLOTHILDE. She hoped you might think of her—of us, before you gave them all to the Church.

COMTESSE. Why should I? I never liked her. My sapphire diadem shall save my soul, not crown her horseface. At least the new image is beautiful—or so they tell me. [*There is a knock at the door. She calls.*] Come in. Come in.

[JUSTINE, an old serving-woman, enters.]

JUSTINE. If you please, madame, Monsieur l'Abbé Cledat de Langlade is here and wishes to speak to you.

COMTESSE [*flattered*]. So he's come himself, has he? They must think me worth saving, then. Well, you've let many men into my bedchamber, but not many have wanted my soul, eh, Justine? Show him up, and fetch some wine.

JUSTINE. Yes, madame.

[JUSTINE exits.]

COMTESSE. Give me the mirror, Clothilde.

[CLOTHILDE gets the mirror from the window seat, moves to the up-stage side of the bed and hands the mirror to the COMTESSE.]

[She picks up a hare's foot from the bedside table, dabs her cheeks with

rouge, arranges her cap, then replaces the hare's foot and mirror on the table.] There. I feel better. A touch of rouge is as good as a glass of wine to a woman. Remember that.

[JUSTINE enters and stands to one side. She carries a tray with a decanter of wine and two glasses.

JUSTINE [announcing]. Monsieur l'Abbé Cledat de Langlade.

[MONSIEUR L'ABBÉ CLEDAT DE LANGLADE enters, crosses, and stands by the foot of the bed. He is followed on by ANSELM, a Novice, who carries a statuette of the Madonna wrapped in a piece of brocade. He stands above the table L.C.

JUSTINE puts the tray with the wine on the table L.C., then exits, closing the door behind her.

COMTESSE. Welcome, my dear Abbé. This is an honour. You must forgive me; I can't rise to receive your blessing.

ABBÉ. I am sorry to find you so afflicted, madame.

COMTESSE. Thank you. But won't you bless me? [*With a laugh*] I like being blessed now as much as I used to like being kissed.

ABBÉ [*shaking his head*]. Ah, madame, I see you have not changed. [*He lifts his hands and blesses her.*] I am here to remind you how great a sinner you have been.

COMTESSE [*complacently*]. Yes. I spent most of my time breaking hearts—and commandments. [*To CLOTHILDE*] Fetch a chair for Monsieur l'Abbé.

[CLOTHILDE moves the chair from R. and places it near the up-stage side of the bed.

ABBÉ. Thank you. [*He sits.*] Who is this child, madame?

COMTESSE. My granddaughter. [*Wickedly*] I assure you, it isn't only the Church who concerns herself with my last moments—and dispositions. [*To CLOTHILDE*] Wait by the window, Clothilde.

[CLOTHILDE moves up C. and sits on the window seat. Well, Abbé, why are you here?

ABBÉ. I have come on a solemn errand.

COMTESSE. The salvation of my soul?

ABBÉ [*with a bow*]. You have not much time left on earth, and should turn your thoughts to holy things.

COMTESSE. So on behalf of the Church you've come to offer me a snug corner in Purgatory? But at a price, I imagine, my dear Abbé—at a price. [*She laughs.*

ABBÉ [*sternly*]. You speak lightly of grave and terrible things. If you died now, in mortal sin, it would be hard to save you from eternal damnation.

COMTESSE [*uneasily*]. You may be right. Who knows? We none of us know anything, especially when we are old and tired.

ABBÉ [*persuasively*]. The Church is wise. Her arms are open to receive the weary. Trust her, and she will give you peace.

COMTESSE. That sounds pleasant. What must I do?

ABBÉ [*impressively*]. First make your full confession. Cleanse and purify your soul. You must acknowledge your misdeeds with humble and heartfelt penitence before you can receive Absolution. Then, if you wish Masses to be said for the repose of your soul you may make an offering of your jewels to One who is all purity, beseeching Her to intercede for you at the Throne of Heaven.

COMTESSE. Ah, I thought this would come. . . .

ABBÉ. The sinner who is truly contrite ever desires to give proof of penitence.

COMTESSE. I see. I've no choice. Well, since I've no inheritor fit to wear my jewels you shall have them for your new image of the Madonna.

ABBÉ. If they are beautiful it is most fitting they should adorn the Queen of Heaven.

COMTESSE. Will you promise me, then, to have Masses said for me, and do all you can for—well, for my comfort in the next world?

ABBÉ [*suavely*]. What can I say, madame, save that God is merciful to the sinner, and to those who truly repent—as you will do.

COMTESSE [*with a shrug*]. Put it as you please so long as our meaning is the same, is that clear?

ABBÉ. Perfectly, madame.

COMTESSE. Shall you hear my confession now?

ABBÉ. Alas, that is impossible. I am on my way to visit his Grace the Bishop of Grenoble. But Father Polydore will be here soon.

COMTESSE. Ah—the young one. Tell me, is She beautiful, this Madonna of yours?

ABBÉ. You shall see for yourself, madame.

COMTESSE. What do you mean?

ABBÉ. I know something of the hardness of human hearts, and I thought the sight of Her might soften yours, so I brought Her to

show you. [*He rises and crosses to C.*] Anselm, set the blessed image here. [*He indicates the table L.C.*]

ANSELM. Yes, Reverend Father.

[*He stands the image on the table.*]

COMTESSE. That was an excellent idea. Women are all curious about their rivals and successors. I commend you, Abbé.

ABBÉ [*rebuking her*]. What I show you now must be viewed with reverence. Look!

[*He removes the brocade, and reveals a statuette of the Virgin carved in dark wood.*]

[*CLOTHILDE rises, stands up R.C., and stares at the statue.*]

COMTESSE. Yes. It is beautiful.

ABBÉ. Beautiful indeed. *Ave Maria Purissima.*

ANSELM. *Ora Pro Nobis.*

COMTESSE. Her face reminds me of some one. Who made it? I've seen nothing to equal the carving since Bernini.

ABBÉ. A young monk of our order. I believe he was famous once.

COMTESSE. Do I know him?

ABBÉ. Yes. Father Polydore.

COMTESSE [*dryly*]. You've chosen a persuasive confessor for me.

ABBÉ [*smoothly*]. He has your spiritual welfare at heart. Madame, I must take my leave. [*To ANSELM*] You may go. Father Polydore will bring the blessed image back to the chapel. [*To the COMTESSE*] Rest assured, my daughter, the blessing of the holy Church shall be upon you.

COMTESSE [*ironically*]. Thank you. Good-bye.

[*The ABBÉ exits. ANSELM follows him off.*]

[*Half to herself*] Well, if we blow out like candles on a windy night the Church will have cheated me. [*To CLOTHILDE*] What do you make of all this, child?

CLOTHILDE [*crossing to C. and looking at the statue*]. She is wonderfully made—but it seems a pity she should have all the jewels.

COMTESSE. Who else is there fit to wear them?

CLOTHILDE [*tentatively*]. Your granddaughters?

COMTESSE. Your sister Virginie? Fat—stupid, and left in the country by a bored husband.

CLOTHILDE. She doesn't mind that; she never liked men.

COMTESSE [*sharply*]. But you think differently?

CLOTHILDE. I find some of them very good to look at.

COMTESSE. And what do they find you, I wonder? Come here. Let me see you.

[CLOTHILDE crosses and stands below the down-stage left corner of the bed.]

Not bad. It's a pity you wear those skimped muslin gowns. Fashion was kinder to me when I was sixteen. Still, you've a good shape. One might make something of you. Tell me, what do you long for?

CLOTHILDE [*flattered*]. Hundreds of things. Would you really like to hear them?

COMTESSE. Yes. Tell me your silly dreams. It'll pass the time till the priest comes. Who do you want to be like?

CLOTHILDE [*seizing her opportunity; boldly*]. You!

COMTESSE. Me?

CLOTHILDE [*moving to the up-stage side of the bed.*] Yes, Grandmère, you—more than anyone else in the world.

[*She perches herself on the edge of the bed.*]

COMTESSE [*chuckling*]. So I've become a young girl's ideal. The last thing I ever expected.

CLOTHILDE [*eagerly*]. Why? You've had everything. Love, and riches and power. Men have fought duels for you, and poets written songs about you; you've been to balls, and had beautiful dresses, and jewels the whole court envied. It would be wonderful to be like you, and I know I could be, if you would show me. I've thought of this for a long time, ever since I first heard the maids whispering stories of you and your lovers. I have wondered so much about you, and been glad when mother scolded me for being like you. How did you do it? Tell me, Grandmère.

COMTESSE. And if I did, what would you do?

CLOTHILDE. I should never go back to Clairvaux again—to be scolded all day long because I'm not a boy, and must have a dowry before they get rid of me. I should go to Paris, and great men would love me, and I should be like you.

COMTESSE [*laughing*]. Like me! You! A little pale insignificant creature. Ho, ho, ho! So you want to make plots, and send men to their death; and wear a queen's pearls round your little thin neck. [*She laughs.*] Country miss sees kings at her feet, and hears swords clashing for her. Oh, it is too amusing. You sit there like a washed-out wax doll and ask me to show you how to be a *grande amoureuse*. I shall die; it's so funny.

CLOTHILDE [*sullenly*]. You asked me, so I told you the truth.

COMTESSE. It's wise to do that sometimes. You've made me laugh. I've not laughed for a long time. I'll reward you. You shall see my jewels—all of them.

CLOTHILDE [*her face lighting despite her discomfiture*]. May I?

COMTESSE. That pleases you? It pleases me, too. It'll do me good to see a little envy in some woman's eyes. Fetch the casket.

CLOTHILDE [*rising*]. Where is it?

COMTESSE. Under the clothes in the marriage chest. [*She gives CLOTHILDE a key from a ribbon hung around her neck.*] Here, take the key.

[CLOTHILDE goes to the chest up L., unlocks it and lifts the lid. They all wonder how many jewels I've had to sell. No one knows what I have left—but you shall see.]

CLOTHILDE [*pulling garments and materials from the chest*]. What lovely things—silks, brocades, and lace.

COMTESSE. What have you found?

CLOTHILDE. A dress embroidered with cornflowers, and a quilted petticoat.

COMTESSE. I wore those at Versailles. The King saw me.

CLOTHILDE. What did he say?

COMTESSE. Nothing. He looked—and sent a note and a necklace. Have you come to the box yet?

CLOTHILDE. No. Here's a slipper with brilliants in the heel.

COMTESSE. He said I had a foot like Cinderella's. [*She chuckles.*] But I never left my prince at midnight.

CLOTHILDE. I've found the box. [*She takes a jewel-box from the chest.*] It's very heavy.

[*She moves to the bed and puts the box on it.*]

COMTESSE. King's ransoms are apt to be, my child. [*She unlocks the box with a second key hung from the ribbon around her neck.*] There. Look!

[*She pulls out a pile of jewellery.*]

CLOTHILDE. Oh, what pearls! Ropes and ropes of them. They weren't sold after all?

COMTESSE. Not one. But no one knows. I only wear sapphires now, so they think the rest all went when I sold my houses and land.

CLOTHILDE. Yes. I heard that. Oh! How smooth they are, and as big as peas.

COMTESSE. I always liked them best. Now I'll show you my

crown. [*She lifts out a sapphire diadem, necklaces, and bracelets.*] Queen's wear, eh? So it was, my dear, till he gave it to me. All the world knows I still have this—and how they covet it!

CLOTHILDE. It's lovely. But I like rubies best.

COMTESSE. Here's the bracelet the Pole gave me. Stanislas—Stanislas . . . I forget his name. He had the finest diamonds in Europe—and such a neat leg. [*She gloats.*] See how they sparkle. They think I sold them—the fools. I wouldn't part with one, but I let them think so—I wanted to keep my jewels to myself.

[CLOTHILDE *bends over the shining heaps. She is now very like her grandmother.*]

CLOTHILDE. They are beautiful—beautiful. And these ruby earrings—they're like clusters of red fire. [*She picks up the ruby earrings and holds them against her face.*] Look, how becoming!

COMTESSE [*slapping CLOTHILDE'S hand*]. How dare you! How dare you touch my jewels. No one shall wear them till I'm dead, and no woman then. Put them down, you little slut. Put them down, I say.

CLOTHILDE [*replacing the earrings in the box*]. I meant no harm. I love them.

COMTESSE [*clawing the necklace together*]. I dare say. But you shan't have them. I'll give them to the Madonna.

CLOTHILDE [*passionately*]. No. They're so lovely. Don't waste them. Who'll see them up in the church? No one but old monks, and women who pray for babies. Think of it. Your pearls will all die on a neck without warmth; and it's so dark there the diamonds won't sparkle, and the dust will lie thick on them. Give them to me, Grandmère. I could go to Court, then, and the rubies would glow in the candlelight, and the diamonds glitter and everyone would say, 'Those are the jewels of Madame La Comtesse de Boisgeline la Tour, who was famous, and beautiful, and beloved by kings.'

COMTESSE [*moved in spite of herself*]. I wonder. They might. But it takes more than you think to win men, my poor little one. How many have kissed you?

CLOTHILDE [*ashamed*]. None—yet.

COMTESSE. At your age I had a husband, a child and a lover—so—you see . . .

CLOTHILDE. I've not had a chance.

COMTESSE. Nonsense! All men are alike. Lords and lackeys—

kings and coachmen. I know. [*She is getting tired.*] It suits you to colour up. If one man had kissed you, I might . . .

CLOTHILDE. Have given me the jewels? Grandmère, listen . . .

COMTESSE [*fretfully*]. Don't pester me. My head aches. [*She runs her fingers through the necklaces.*] I got these by my own wits. Why should you have them? You, who can't make even a stable boy kiss you. No, no, my girl, you must win my jewels if you want them.

CLOTHILDE. How?

COMTESSE. I don't know. I'm tired.

CLOTHILDE [*pitilessly*]. You must tell me. What shall I do?

COMTESSE. Make some man kiss you, then.

CLOTHILDE. And if I did, you'd promise?

COMTESSE. Yes, yes. Fetch me some wine.

[*CLOTHILDE crosses to the table L.C., pours some wine into a glass, and brings it to the COMTESSE.*

[*She sips the wine*] Ah—that's better.

CLOTHILDE [*suddenly*]. But there's no one here. Not a single man except Blind Jean, and no one ever comes but the priests, and the physician, who is as old as Jean. It's impossible—hopeless.

COMTESSE [*maliciously*]. Exactly. Still—you'll have had your chance. You can tell your mother so.

CLOTHILDE. So it was just a trick?

COMTESSE [*sipping her wine*]. That's all. I've tricked so many. But I'll tell you something, my girl. When you fool a man never tell him how you did it. It's better to send him off with his head full of fine notions—renunciation, and the world well lost—than sore like a whipped schoolboy. You may need him again some day. This wine is good, better than the thin stuff I'm usually given.

[*A bell rings off.*

CLOTHILDE. That must be Father Polydore. Shall I let him in?

COMTESSE. He can wait a little. It's wise to keep men waiting.

CLOTHILDE. Why?

COMTESSE. Because they never prize what they win easily. If a man waits an hour on a cold doorstep, he'll find the warmth of a woman's arms doubly pleasant.

CLOTHILDE. But if he goes away?

COMTESSE. Anger never warmed a bed yet. He'll think all night of what he might have had, and return for it next day.

CLOTHILDE [*indicating the jewels*]. Shall I put these away?

COMTESSE [*drowsily*]. Leave out the sapphires, the crown—the necklace and the bracelets.

[CLOTHILDE *gathers up the other jewels and puts them in the box.*

[*She fingers the sapphires.*] I'll wear them later, they match my ribbons.

[CLOTHILDE *takes the jewel-case to the marriage chest, opens the lid of the chest, and then looks cautiously around. The COMTESSE is intent on her sapphires. CLOTHILDE shuts the lid, but keeps the casket hidden under a fold of her dress. She noisily locks the marriage chest, then goes to the window, where she slips the jewel casket behind the curtain.*

CLOTHILDE. It is growing dark. [*She moves to the bed.*] Here is the key, Grandmère.

[*She hands the key of the marriage chest to the COMTESSE.*

[*There is a knock at the door.*

COMTESSE. Let him in.

[CLOTHILDE *crosses and opens the door. FATHER POLYDORE enters. He has the face of a dreamer, worn and sensitive. He seems overwrought, and his movements are abrupt. He carries a scroll. He stares at CLOTHILDE for a moment, then, as if recollecting himself, bows and crosses to the foot of the bed, his hand raised in blessing.*

[*Sleepily*] What have you come for?

POLYDORE. The Abbé sent word that you wished for a priest, madame.

COMTESSE. Ah, yes. I remember now. You must forgive me. My memory plays me tricks. It was you who made the statue, wasn't it?

POLYDORE. Yes.

COMTESSE. I congratulate you.

[POLYDORE *bows.*

It reminds me of some one—yes. [*She stares sleepily at the statue.*] It is like—it is like Clothilde.

CLOTHILDE [*startled*]. Me?

[POLYDORE *drops the scroll.*

COMTESSE. What have you dropped?

POLYDORE [*picking up the scroll*]. The document about the sapphires. I was told to bring it for you to sign.

COMTESSE [*feebly*]. I won't do it now.

[CLOTHILDE *crosses to the bed and arranges the pillows.*

POLYDORE. Later on will do, when I have heard your confession.

COMTESSE [*fretfully*]. Not now. [*To CLOTHILDE*] Tell him—not now—a little doze first. [*She hands the glass to CLOTHILDE*] That wine—so strong.

CLOTHILDE [*putting the glass on the bedside table*]. She seems so tired, Father; could you wait a little?

POLYDORE. But the Abbé said——

CLOTHILDE. Shhh! She is asleep already. Shall I light the candles? She won't sleep long if they are lit.

POLYDORE. Light them, then.

[CLOTHILDE *takes the taper from the bedside table, lights it at the fire, crosses to the table L.C. and lights the candles.*

[*He walks restlessly up and down between the table and the window, watching CLOTHILDE.*] I must go.

CLOTHILDE. Please, not yet, Father.

POLYDORE. Why not?

CLOTHILDE. She may wake in a minute. Old people sleep in snatches, and if she finds you've gone she'll be angry with me.

POLYDORE [*moving down c.*]. I can come back.

CLOTHILDE. It may be too late then.

POLYDORE. What do you mean?

CLOTHILDE. The physician said she would not last long, and she changes every hour. Please stay. She seemed strange just now. Supposing she died when I was alone with her. I've never seen anyone die.

POLYDORE [*strangely*]. When they're old it is easy, but when they are young it is terrible—terrible. [*He stares at her.*] I have seen it. There was a young girl once—like you. [*He pulls himself together.*] I must go.

CLOTHILDE. No, please. I'm frightened.

POLYDORE. There is nothing to fear. Put your trust in God.

CLOTHILDE. But He seems so far away.

POLYDORE [*wearily*]. Yes, I know. And when the dead go to Him they too seem infinitely far. [*He puts his hand to his head and sways as if he were going to faint.*] I am tired.

CLOTHILDE. You're ill. You look so pale.

POLYDORE. It is nothing. I took no food to-day.

CLOTHILDE. Why not?

POLYDORE [*indicating the statue*]. I did not finish this until an hour ago, and when I work I forget the time.

CLOTHILDE. You must rest. [*She indicates the window seat.*] Sit there; the air is cooler.

[POLYDORE *moves up c. and sits on the window seat.* I'll give you some wine. [*She moves to the table L.C., pours a glass of wine and takes it to him.*] Drink this.

POLYDORE. Thank you. [*He sips the wine and looks out of the window. With sudden passion*] How beautiful it is here—how beautiful. One feels the stir of spring.

CLOTHILDE [*quick to catch his mood*]. Yes. I found violets in the woods to-day. At home there are only pale flowers, but these are dark, like wine, and sweet. [*She shows him a bunch of violets tucked into her gown.*] Look!

POLYDORE. You found them in the upper wood.

CLOTHILDE. Yes. How did you know?

POLYDORE. I saw you. I take my breviary to the meadow below the Abbey.

CLOTHILDE. I remember. I passed you yesterday, and once before.

POLYDORE. No, twice.

CLOTHILDE. The first time I was picking flowers for madame. She loves those tall blue hyacinths. They are the colour of her sapphires.

POLYDORE. They were blue, like the Madonna's robes. You held them as if you loved them.

CLOTHILDE. I love all beautiful things. Flowers—jewels . . .

POLYDORE. Beauty—but we must beware of beauty.

CLOTHILDE. Why? God made it, didn't He?

POLYDORE. In his sermon to-day the Abbé warned us against the spring, and the loveliness of these soft days.

CLOTHILDE. That is too hard for me to understand. I wonder . . .

POLYDORE. Shhh! There is a bird singing his Vespers.

[CLOTHILDE *takes POLYDORE's glass, moves to the table and refills it. She stops to look at the statue.*

CLOTHILDE. Why did you make her like me? For she is like me—a little. It is as if you had looked at me and remembered some one else.

[*She moves to L. of him and gives him the glass.*

[POLYDORE *drinks and then speaks dreamily. Fatigue, emotion, and the strong wine have all had their effect on him.*

POLYDORE. That is what I did—for we are all haunted by one face. In the beginning God made all living things in pairs—each creature had its complement; and the first man his maid. It is the same now. God doesn't change His ways—so each one of us holds in his mind the image of the woman who was fashioned for him. But only the artist shows his vision to the world. Botticelli coloured a sad loveliness; and Michael Angelo made Amazons in marble, and I, because you're like my dream, have carved your shape in wood.

CLOTHILDE [*softly*]. I see. But did you find your dream, once, long ago, when you were in the world?

POLYDORE. Yes.

CLOTHILDE. What happened? Did she die?

POLYDORE. Yes.

CLOTHILDE. I'm sorry. [*She touches his sleeve.*] Is that why you wear these!

POLYDORE. I must do penance, always.

CLOTHILDE. Why?

POLYDORE. I killed her.

[CLOTHILDE *starts*.

Oh, not with my hands—that would have been kinder, perhaps. I went away, and when I came back I found her dying. The child died too. My ugly, careless lust destroyed them both.

CLOTHILDE. Why did you leave her?

POLYDORE. They gave me work to do in Rome, and I stayed on, forgetting time. I meant to come back—and when I did . . .

[*He covers his face with his hands.*

CLOTHILDE. Was she dead?

POLYDORE. No. But she never knew me. She lay in my arms, raving, imploring me to come. Then—she died.

CLOTHILDE. So afterwards you gave up the world, and fame, and all the things you had left her for?

POLYDORE. I could never punish myself enough. If she had forgiven me—if she had heard one word of mine, it might have been different. Sometimes I think she will find a way to ease this agony in me. Sometimes I dare hope for a sign.

CLOTHILDE [*puzzled*]. A sign she has forgiven you?

POLYDORE. Yes. For eight years now I've prayed, and ached, and wondered—*[there is something exultant in his voice]* and now...

[He rises, crosses to the table L.C., and looks at the statue.]

CLOTHILDE. Has it happened?

POLYDORE. Not yet. I wait for a miracle—and I know it will come.

CLOTHILDE. How?

POLYDORE *[passionately]*. If the first of your prayers had been answered, would you dare hope for the second?

CLOTHILDE *[moving to R. of him]*. Yes.

POLYDORE. Listen, for this concerns you too. The night the Abbé told me I was to carve the new Madonna a dream came to me. I saw the statue stand before me, and she was made like my darling. Then suddenly life moved her, and she leant forward and forgave me, so that I was comforted, and at peace again. When I woke I knew what I had to do. I chose my wood, and I began to work, but my mind was confused with a thousand memories. I worked in vain. I could not make it like her, and knew I never should unless I saw her again, even if only for a moment. So I wept, and prayed for a vision.

CLOTHILDE. Did you think I was sent to be your vision?

POLYDORE. Yes. I saw you in the wood. Your arm curved round the sheaf of flowers as if you held a child, and your head drooped, and you smiled as she did—and I knew how my Madonna should be made.

CLOTHILDE. Am I so like her then?

POLYDORE. Most marvellously like. Your hair is darker, and your eyes are brown, but your face is the same, and the line of your throat, and the curve of your breast. Come, let me see you together.

[He takes her hand and leads her to the statue.]

CLOTHILDE. What must I do?

[The COMTESSE awakens and lies silently watching.]

POLYDORE. Stand as she stands.

[CLOTHILDE poses herself in the attitude of the statue.]

[He looks from CLOTHILDE to the statue.] Ah, now I see what I've thought of month after month. The head should droop more; the hands be held higher. I need some drapery here; the line is spoiled without it.

CLOTHILDE. There is a cloak behind you on the chest.

[POLYDORE *moves to the marriage chest and picks up a blue silk cape from the clothing.*

POLYDORE. Blue. The Virgin's colour.

[*He holds out the cape to CLOTHILDE.*

CLOTHILDE. It would be better if you put it round yourself. You can see how the folds should fall.

POLYDORE [*draping the cape around her*]. Your body is gentle, as hers was. [*He kneels and spreads the material around her feet.*] There—it should hang so, and spread its richness out as if it floated on a cloud. Yes, she is good. The best I ever made. And to-morrow I shall see her on the high altar. She will be crowned with jewels, candles will shine before her, and children will bring her flowers; and when they have all gone I shall kneel in front of her and pray—as I've prayed a thousand times, for her forgiveness.

CLOTHILDE [*softly*]. What will she do?

[POLYDORE, *on his knees, has his eyes shut, and there is ecstasy in his voice.*

POLYDORE. She will lean forward and smile as she used to smile, and I shall feel her kiss and know she has forgiven me, and all this agony will end.

[*He opens his eyes.*

[CLOTHILDE *bends over POLYDORE, who clasps and kisses her. The COMTESSE shakes with silent laughter.*

COMTESSE [*shrilly*]. Bravo, child! Bravo!

POLYDORE [*stumbling to his feet*]. My God!

CLOTHILDE [*quietly*]. He kissed me.

COMTESSE. Full on the lips, too, as a lover should. Excellent, excellent. You've more wit than I thought. That blue cape suits you. I couldn't have planned it better myself.

CLOTHILDE. It wasn't planned.

COMTESSE. I said they were all alike, didn't I?

CLOTHILDE. But, Grandmère . . .

COMTESSE [*irritably*]. That's enough. The comedy's ended; don't drag it out now. Come here.

[CLOTHILDE *crosses and stands by the down-stage side of the bed.*

Now stoop down.

[CLOTHILDE *bends slightly.*

[*She picks up the sapphire necklace and puts it over CLOTHILDE's head.*

Now let me see you. Not bad, not bad. It makes them glow to lie

on young flesh. Better than dry wood, eh? In five years that little neck will fill out and set them off nicely.

CLOTHILDE. They're really mine, then—all of them?

COMTESSE. Of course, child. I keep my promises.

POLYDORE [*harshly*]. What does this mean?

COMTESSE. That you've lost your Virgin her trinkets, my friend, that's all.

POLYDORE. How?

COMTESSE. Tell him, Clothilde.

CLOTHILDE [*hesitantly*]. She said—she said if one man kissed me I should have the jewels.

POLYDORE [*aghast*]. And I was . . .

COMTESSE. The man—exactly.

POLYDORE. So I've been tricked.

COMTESSE. Very prettily.

POLYDORE. Tricked into my old sins again. The Abbé was right to warn us against beauty. You might have spared me this, you whom I thought so innocent—aping my dead love to tempt me—using your body to compare with hers.

CLOTHILDE [*crossing to L. of POLYDORE*]. But it was you who compared us, I never—

POLYDORE. Get back. How dare you stand by Her again. You're not fit to come near holy things. Oh, I should have known nothing but evil could come out of this house of harlots.

COMTESSE. You're insulting. You shall be punished for this.

POLYDORE. Maybe, but not by you. I was sent here to listen to your sins. You should be crawling beneath the weight of them.

COMTESSE. I shall crawl to no one, and, since our subject is sin, what of your own, young man? Will the Abbé commend you for losing him my sapphires?

POLYDORE. If you want the Church's pardon they must still be Hers.

COMTESSE. Pardon! [*She laughs maliciously*]. You must get it for yourself first before you can give it to me. You need it more than I do now. [*To CLOTHILDE*] Did you enjoy your first kiss, child?

POLYDORE [*thundering*]. Be silent. I tell you I shall pay for this madness with torment. Pay and repent and agonize all through a bitter lifetime—but as for you, your repentance must be now. In the sight of heaven you are horrible. Your sin has been against all

beauty, for you used your own to destroy the God in men and change them into beasts. It is just you should grow loathsome in old age.

COMTESSE [*raising herself on her pillows*]. Loathsome! How dare you call me that!

POLYDORE. You're a travesty of womanhood. Painted, bedaubed. Your beauty has gone. Do you know why? Because beauty is of the spirit, and you cheapened yours away, God knows how many years ago.

COMTESSE. You impudent scoundrel. I'll have you whipped—unfrocked.

CLOTHILDE. Please, you're making her ill.

POLYDORE. I tell you the loveliness of youth God gives, but the beauty of age is made by those who possess it. They fashioned it themselves out of courage, faith, and tenderness. When have you prized these? Never. All you wanted was power, riches, and pleasure. And look what they have brought you to—ugliness, fear.

COMTESSE [*beating her pillows with rage*]. You shall get nothing. You and the Church. Clothilde shall have my jewels. I'll not be cheated by a pack of greedy priests. You're all hypocrites. [*Her voice rises to a scream.*] Yes, smug, sly hypocrites, frauds, liars . . . Ah—ah . . .

[*She gives a cry and falls back muttering.*]

CLOTHILDE [*running to the COMTESSE*]. What's the matter? Shall I fetch the physician? Grandmère . . . [*To POLYDORE*] I can't understand what she says. What shall I do?

POLYDORE. Nothing—yet. [*He crosses to the up-stage side of the bed and takes the COMTESSE's hand.*] Fetch the mirror.

[*CLOTHILDE picks up the mirror, passes it across the bed to*

POLYDORE, who holds it to the COMTESSE's lips.

CLOTHILDE. Grandmère! Why doesn't she answer?

POLYDORE [*looking at the mirror*]. She is dead.

CLOTHILDE. Oh. [*She involuntarily withdraws a few steps.*] How can she be? She seemed so strong a moment ago. Why did you make her angry?

POLYDORE. I hoped she would repent.

[*He folds the COMTESSE's hands over her breast and makes the sign of the cross.*]

CLOTHILDE [*moving nearer to the bed*]. How small she looks. It seems strange not to feel frightened of her any more.

[*There is a silence during which POLYDORE crosses to the table L.C., picks up a candle, and places it on the bedside table. CLOTHILDE stands at the foot of the bed.*

POLYDORE. She died unblessed. Can you understand what you have done? Your wantonness has brought her to damnation.

[*CLOTHILDE glances quickly to the window where the casket is hidden, then to the sapphires on the bedside table, and fingers the necklace. She hesitates, then makes up her mind what to do.*

CLOTHILDE. No, no, the Church must have her jewels. Since I have sinned I give them in token of my penitence. Look. You can have them all. [*She removes the necklace, crosses, picks up the diadem and bracelets, and holds them out to POLYDORE.*] I don't want them. You made me see how horribly she came by them. Please take them back.

POLYDORE. Gifts you make now cannot undo the evil that is done. Only prayer can help her soul in purgatory. As for me, mine is in torment now. You did more than make sin, you have filled me with loathing for all I once loved.

CLOTHILDE [*crossing to the table L.C.*]. I did nothing—nothing but feel sorry for you.

[*She puts the jewellery on the table.*

POLYDORE [*crossing to C.*]. You tempted me—betrayed me.

CLOTHILDE [*playing the innocent*]. I never meant to. I wish you could believe that. You wouldn't be so unhappy then. I've done nothing wrong. Grandmère only promised me the jewels because she thought I would never win them, and how could I dream that you, a priest, would kiss me? I was right, too, for it wasn't *me* you kissed.

POLYDORE. Not you?

CLOTHILDE. It was the vision of your dead love—and all your thoughts and longings were for her.

POLYDORE. I sinned because of you.

CLOTHILDE. No, you've done no wrong, either. If you had kissed your carved Madonna would you have counted it a sin?

POLYDORE [*bewildered*]. No.

CLOTHILDE. Am I more to you than she is? What do you know of me, Clothilde, who is sixteen and has no dowry? Nothing. You have looked at me, and thought of your love, but you've never once considered me.

POLYDORE. That is true.

CLOTHILDE [*cleverly*]. In your mind I am another image of her, nothing else. And does it matter which one of us you kissed—or which stooped down to touch your lips?

POLYDORE [*hoarsely*]. What do you mean?

[CLOTHILDE, *quick to make use of her opportunity, speaks with well-feigned exaltation.*

CLOTHILDE. I believe—I believe I was sent to be your vision.

POLYDORE. Oh, God, if I could think that!

CLOTHILDE. It's true. I know it. Aren't prayers nearly always answered in ways we never expect?

POLYDORE. If I could believe I should be at peace.

CLOTHILDE. What makes you doubt?

POLYDORE. I am all confused. I cannot tell good from evil—nor the blessed from the cursed thing.

CLOTHILDE [*quickly; giving him no time to think*]. But surely it's a blessed thing—a real miracle, that grants the prayers of three people? If it was your vision that came to you, then you're forgiven and comforted. And why shouldn't it have been? I felt a strange terrible pity when I bent over you, as if a spirit not my own possessed me. And look, because of this, I have given you back the jewels. Grandmère's lips moved before she died: perhaps she was contrite after all. Don't you see the finger of God in all this?

POLYDORE [*slowly*]. Yes. But you spoke of three people; who is the third?

CLOTHILDE. Myself. The few little trinkets left in her casket can be mine. They will do for my dowry, and that is all I want—now.

POLYDORE. I have been blind. Forgive me. I—I've been arrogant and sinful, and yet this marvel has come to me. How shall I thank you?

CLOTHILDE. I'm glad you're not angry and unhappy any more. Will you—will you say Masses for Grandmère?

POLYDORE. As many as you wish.

CLOTHILDE. Thank you. [*She picks up the jewellery.*] Take these then.

[*She hands the jewellery to POLYDORE.*

POLYDORE. I will go now. I feel it is I who should ask your blessing.

[*He crosses to the table L.C., slips the necklace over the head of the image, puts the diadem on her head, and then lifts his hand and blesses CLOTHILDE.*

CLOTHILDE [*softly*]. Good-bye.

[POLYDORE *picks up the image and exits. The moment the door closes behind him CLOTHILDE flings back her head and laughs. Then she runs across to the window, picks up the casket, and brings it to the table L.C. where she puts it beside the candle. She opens it and pulls out the jewels.*

[*She laughs softly.*] They're mine—all mine. Rubies—lovely rubies.

[CLOTHILDE *takes the earrings from the casket and begins to fasten them on, as—*

the CURTAIN falls.